DECOLONIZING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: A DINÉ (NAVAJO) HERMENEUTIC FOR RESTORING THE GOSPEL'S BEAUTY (*HÓZHÓÓN*)

A Practical Research Project

presented to

the Faculty of

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

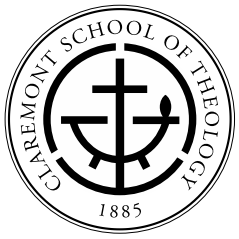
Doctor of Ministry

by

Calvin Y. Hill

May 2026

Copyright © 2026 by Calvin Y. Hill



This Practical Research Project, completed by

Calvin Y. Hill

under the direction of his faculty committee and approved by its members,

has been presented to and accepted by

the Faculty of the Claremont School of Theology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Lincoln E. Galloway

Dean of the Faculty

Dr. Andrew Dreitcer

May 2026

Abstract

Decolonizing Christian Education: A Diné (Navajo) Hermeneutic for Restoring the Gospel's Beauty (*Hózhóón*)

Calvin Y. Hill

For many Indigenous people, particularly within the *Diné* (Navajo) people, there exists a deep tension between their ancestral ethnicity and the Christian faith introduced through colonization. This tension has contributed to a fractured sense of identity, making it difficult for some Diné individuals to fully embrace *Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón*, a state of complete harmony with the natural world, the universe, with the Holy People (*Diyin Diné*), self-identity, and Creator God. The problem has caused disharmony among Diné Christians and non-Christians, feeling unable to claim both their heritage and their faith without conflict. I recognize that this tension persists because the Diné spiritual foundations are still not fully recognized as a legitimate and grace-filled starting point for theological understanding, therefore this project is my attempt to begin a Diné theological lens.

This project, then, is to develop *K'é* (relationality), a Diné epistemology, as a primary hermeneutical lens for constructing a Diné theology that affirms both cultural identity and Christian faith. It will draw from Diné creation teachings, including the role of White Shell Woman, and a ceremonial practice (*Yéii Bi Cheii)* to show how K'é (relationality) functions as a living pedagogy that orders relationship among Diné people, creation, the Holy People, and Creator God. This work creates a beginning step toward a fuller theology of K'é, establishing an initial interpretive context grounded in Diné pedagogy.

This work articulates a theology that seeks to advance healing among Indigenous people, restore identity, and reframe biblical truth from an authentic Diné pedagogy of Creator God, distinct from colonial distortions. It also suggests that such a view holds a potential path for decolonizing Christian education and shaping a more faithful future for the United Methodist Church. Conceivably, any effort to decolonize Christian education must begin with the Church herself—particularly the United Methodist Church as an institution historically shaped by colonial structures. Therefore, in this study I address, from my K'é theology, a reorientation ecclesial movement toward decolonization that must begin at the United Methodist institutional level before it can faithfully reshape Christian education.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that K'é (relationality) and Christian faith are not opposing forces but can be brought together through a culturally rooted, theologically sound interpretive, and rightful relationship that leads both White Christians and Diné people back toward Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, and beauty of life through integration rather than division.

Acknowledgments

First, I honor my wife, Sheri Ann Hill, whose love, and support have guided me in understanding the complexities of White American culture and religion. As an Ojibwe and Scottish woman raised in an English cultural and religious world, she has shown me what it means to live faithfully between identities, and she has helped me see the beauty and struggle of navigating cultural difference with courage and grace.

To my children, who stepped away from organized religion after witnessing the harm and mistreatment their father endured at the hands of the denomination yet still remain faithful followers of Christ. I offer my deepest gratitude. You continue to live out your faith through the strength of your own Native traditions, holding on to Jesus while honoring who Creator God made you to be. Your integrity humbles me.

I am also profoundly grateful to the Native Grace United Methodist Community and Pastor Norman Mark. You all have stood with me in bringing a contextual, Spirit-led message to the Diné people rooted in the Beauty Way, wisdom, and resilience of Diné traditions of faith. Together, we have worked to speak to our people in a way that feels true to who we are.

Lastly, I give my heartfelt thanks to my Diné Medicine Men and spiritual colleagues, who opened their hearts and shared their wisdom in our conversations. Your willingness to walk with me in seeking Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, beauty—for our beloved Diné people is a gift I hold with reverence.

Contents

Acknowledgments vi
Introduction 1
Ministry Need 1
Response to the Need 1
Significance of the Project Context 1
Theological and Conceptual Stance 5
Methodology 8
Definitions, Delimitations and Limitations 12

Chapter 1 Theoretical Framework 14
History 14
White Shell Woman 17
Background of the Study 21
Purpose of the Study 28
Methodology: A Diné Hermeneutic and Epistemology 28

Chapter 2 Relational, Kinship, Communal, K' é 32
Relations, *K'é* (Kinship) 32
Sacred Places 36
. Healing 38
K'é as a Hermeneutic of Salvation 41

Chapter 3 Narrative of Disrupted Identity 44
Struggles 47
Christian Education and its Colonial Legacy 53

Chapter 4 Diné Spirituality as a Hermeneutical Tool 60

Chapter 5 Toward a Decolonized Native Christian Education: Practical Application 70

Chapter 6 K'é (Relationality) and the Future of the Church 74

Chapter 7 *K'é* As Theological Disruption and Ecclesial Future 79

Conclusion 82

INTRODUCTION

Ministry Need

The Diné people need to reclaim their identity, spiritual wholeness, and heritage in a way that empowers them to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a sacred message for their healing and not imposed as 'White Man's gospel.' This message of good news has to affirm their uniqueness in Creator God.

Response to the Need

The response is designed to develop a Diné hermeneutic grounded in tribal wisdom that restores Creator God's redeeming grace through cultural practices, stories, and ceremonies, and also guides the Diné people toward a renewed sense of completeness, and a life of Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, beauty.

Significance of the Project

(i) Context:

For many Native Americans, especially among Diné, Christianity is still-associated with the dire consequences of religious terror and viewed as a central tool of colonization by the government and missionaries. Even presently today, Christianity is viewed as a faith distorted by the White Man's imperialist ideology. This legacy has meant that Diné people who identify as Christians struggle with the issues of a past marked by terror; a faith that offered justification

to an imperialist ideology, and also the harm done to Indigenous peoples. Certain questions are critical for the present and the future of Christianity. One most particular is, What does it mean to engage in the work of decolonizing Christianity that allows for the work of truth-telling, healing, liberation, and restoration?

One possible starting point is an approach to education that seeks to design and provide resources, pathways, and outcomes for the work of truth telling healing, liberation, and restoration. This approach to education will include re-interpreting and reimaging a terrorizing historical faith. Although this study will focus on education, it is with the understanding that education alone will not heal the psyche of people, erase the trauma, rewrite the stories, or remove the lingering effects of a colonizing and imperialist past.

If education is a resource of restitution from colonization, then there must be an attempt to create this process. This project seeks to move in that direction. However, it is important to acknowledge that in the Western model, education is designed for individual achievement, a process that defines instruction as the possession of knowledge and skill. In Diné culture, education is lived. It is about forming relationships with all creation (K'é) and continually walking in harmony (Ho'zho'), it is a foundation shaped by every arrangement of life, a knowledge of interconnectedness, and when achieved it transmits as success.

(ii) Justification:

The significance of writing this proposal is to educate Indigenous people, specifically the Diné people in a decolonized way that addresses a long-standing tension that many Christian and non-Christian quietly carry as their opposing thought, "How can I honor the Beauty Way of

my heritage without feeling like I must reject my faith in Christ or betray my old Navajo faith I have received from childhood?"[1]

A decolonized educational approach matters because it restores identity that was historically taken away, it gives space for faith to coexist with authentic beauty of self and culture. For generations education was used as an instrument of assimilation. It silenced Diné heritage, disconnected people from their source of wisdom that had sustained their ancestors (Holy People) and provided the framework for fullness of identity (Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon). By usage of Diné epistemology, this alternative educational model, seeks to heal and affirm that embracing Diné identity is not a rejection of faith but rather an embrace of a God-given dignity.

This decolonized approach honors the Diné worldview of wisdom and knowledge of Creator God in K'é (relational, kinship), Ho'zho' (harmony, balance, beauty, peace), and the sacred succession set by the *Diyin Diné* (Holy People). The approach will bring Diné people in conversation with Christian discipleship and authentic identity of themselves, exhibiting the veer image of Creator God within their own context. This allows Diné Christian and non-Christians to see that their heritage contains its own theological depth, relational wisdom, and pathways to understand Creator God through a natural revelation in creation (theistic naturalism), community, and authentic knowledge of Ho'zho' (harmony, balance). This approach will help to dismantle the colonial message that many evangelists proclaimed that faith in Christ means giving up one's culture, and therefore, those past teachings can be replaced with a vision of hope embedded in Indigenous spiritual formation.

[1] Norman Mark (United Methodist minister, Native Grace United Methodist Church, Cortez, Colorado), interview by Calvin Y. Hill, September 28, 2025.

Furthermore, it will create a lens to help future Diné leaders, both Christian, and non-Christian to see a path forward that is wholistic and empowering; and more specifically equip Christian laity and candidates seeking or selected for ordained ministry. It will empower them to teach, claim, and restore the gospel in a way that does not repeat colonial harm but will instead strengthen their cultural identity, support mental-wellness, and bring spiritual healing that will nurture the next generation's faith and help reclaim their heritage. It is a needed educational resource to help Diné people, Christian, and non-Christian, to live as whole healthy people, completely Diné and fully Christian without contradiction or shame. It will also shape spiritual practices and allow participants to articulate Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, beauty— as Christian language, without being subjected to condemnation for conveying traditional Diné theological terminology.

(iii) Audience:

The audience for this proposal are the Indigenous Americans, Christian, and non-Christian, urban and reservation descent, but specifically the Diné people. Many traditional Diné living on the reservation and urban descendants, seek a hermeneutic lens that allows them to hold faith in Christ and their cultural identity in balance. Many desire a deep theological education for both personal insights and ministerial involvement but without the tension and distinctions left by missionaries, including the old stigma that equates Christianity with total assimilation. This proposal is designed to offer an interpretive educational journey that acknowledges Diné identity, supports mental wellness, and brings spiritual healing for this generation and the next four generations. It is a lens that claims Indigenous heritage to strengthen Christian discipleship.

A secondary audience may possibly include theologians, ministers, and scholars who are interested in Indigenous theological perspectives. The group may not be Diné or Indigenous themselves, but they seek to understand how Indigenous epistemologies in relational (K'é) and cultural narratives that can fit and contribute to a broader theological discourse. For these scholars, this proposal offers the perspective of a decolonized Diné hermeneutic lens. Though, it will offer an approach that challenges Western assumptions and perspectives on tribal wisdom and usage of theistic natalism to form such a lens, and it will increase their interest and knowledge of Indigenous American theological reflection and engagement.

Theological and Theoretical/Conceptual Stance

My theology is as a Diné (Navajo), gives a contextual approach centered in relationality (K'é), harmony (Ho'zho'), and covenantal life (Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón) that is affirmed in Creator God's promises as the source of atonement, with acknowledging a promised Redeemer. This relational (K'é) approach is to share interpreted lived experiences as a Diné (Navajo), and a follower of Christ Jesus. The lens reflects Diné cosmology, epistemology, and a pedagogy which gives Christian education the means to change. It gives a Diné (Navajo) knowledge system in becoming a valid theological source.

The Diné word K'é means kinship, relational existence, and belonging, yet the translation is insufficient. K'é articulates a relational ontology in which all forms of life are interconnected, and the Diné emerges though one's relationship to all relatives, community, the earth, ceremonial life, and the spiritual realm of the Holy People. With understanding K'é, it is not merely descriptive but constitutive, conferring coherence, authority, and certainty to Diné

identity and establishing the ethical conditions for right relationship. Through this lens, the hope is to offer relational responsibility and accountability that undergirds moral decision, discipleship, and community love within the Christian faith. It situates faith within a theological task embedded in a loving Creator God, self, and neighbor.

Ho'zho' means harmony, balance, peace, and beauty. It offers the same significance of the ancient Israelite word Shalom. In Diné epistemology, Ho'zho' is used as a theological lens for understanding Creator God in daily life, keeping balance in our interconnectedness, and gives footage to one association in creation. It reflects God's holy order and invites formation of ones need of affirmation to hold a continuous covenantal relationship (Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón).

Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón is where Diné people find complete balance, harmony, peace, and the ability to walk in beauty here on earth. From a Christian interpretation, it's a life of sanctification, a life fully redeemed. This approach starts cognitively, and melts all learned godly attributes through the entire body until it reaches the bottom of the sole, assuring the ongoing journey towards holiness. It gifts each person with the ability to walk in harmony and sustains them to keep a covenantal relation with Creator God and neighbor.

The above Diné approach integrates an Indigenous epistemology with Christian faith to create a spiritual formation that reclaims identity, to experience a harmonious life and recognizes a traditional view of covenant relationship within their own communal (K'é) order. It is placing faith in a holistic approach to life rather than purely doctrinal and institutional obligation.

Theoretically, this methodological perspective can be framed as a decolonizing Indigenous pedagogy towards Christian faith that uses a relational (K'é) hermeneutical lens to bring balance to faith and identity. It will offer a critique of White Western epistemologies and pedagogy, and of the missionaries' imperialistic approach of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But the ultimate goal is to reclaim Indigenous knowledge as a valid wisdom and spiritually form that conveys Creator God's revelation of truth.

Using relational pedagogy (K'é), the methodology sets in motion the work of reclaiming Diné identity. It provides knowledge and wisdom for Diné people to have ownership and pride, to network responsibly, and to demonstrate accountability to family, community, land, and Creator God. It is an approach that creates honor and respect by recalling the Holy People's (Dyin Diné) teachings. It also will help the learners, not as abstract individuals, but members of a relational living network to engage in a natural theological task within the culture, communal, and with the natural world.

Integrating balance and harmony (Ho'zho) with sanctified living (Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón) is to view this hermeneutical lens as a process to live fully secured in self, and right action that formulates spiritual holiness. This lens, then, becomes an active process towards the recurring orientation of growth in knowledge, wisdom, and self-control. It is an invitation to view education in a holistic formation based on a relational view of Creator God and all living forms, rather than as the transmission of abstract knowledge.

The vision is to create a hermeneutic lens that interprets relational and harmonious life in view of traditional Diné teaching as a foundation method to those who follow Christ. It allows reconciliation, responsibility, and accountability to reclaim their Indigenous heritage

with a faith in Christ and not force assimilation. It empowers the Diné people and strengthens their ability to function in a dualistic worldview.

Theologically, this stance points to Creator God and the grace-filled presence of Christ while embracing Diné epistemology and cosmological revelation given to Indigenous people. It develops an authentic faith in Creator God. It draws on decolonial Indigenous pedagogy and relational hermeneutic, using K'é (Kinship, relational), Ho'zho' (harmony, balance, peace, and beauty), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, and beauty for covenantal living.

Method

As a full-blooded Diné researcher raised in the language, ceremonial practices, and many traditional teachings, but experienced later in childhood the interruptions of boarding school, a mission of assimilation, and now as an adult, able to be grounded to the recovery of my Diné cultural memory, my positionality, then, is essential to the contextual methodology of this project. My childhood upbringing was immersed in the Diné language, narratives, and ceremonies that cultivated my ethics and morality long before knowing of Jesus Christ. The journey of assimilation through boarding school experience, distanced me from portions of Diné knowledge of K'é (communal engagement) where I lost some of my identity, but this project reawakened the narratives from the early stories of the Diné epistemology of the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and creation.

Having conversations with my Diné people functioned not only as data gathering moments but as a cultural reconnection that restored traditional insights related to our creation narrative, K'é (relation), and a traditional view of redemption (Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh

Hózhóón). My hope, then, is that my positionality does not distort the research, but rather it enables authenticity, dignity, and cultural accountability within interpretation of narratives.

This project employs a qualitative autoethnography methodology that integrates Diné epistemology with a biblical theological frame positioned in Genesis 1-2. The biblical creation narratives, with the emphasis on Diné interpretation of K'é (relationality), covenant with land and Creator God. In understanding K'é, it verbalizes sacred orders in life (Ho'zho') and shows possible parallel reflection of the biblical and Diné narratives to gain knowledge of Creator God. This lens illuminates the cultural concept redemption in a holistic witness. It will serve as the central interpretive bridge of decolonizing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and restoring it from the ugly view of 'The White Man's Gospel.'

In my research almost all Navajos, Christian and non-Christian, did not allow recording or note-taking during conversation due to historical trauma, concerns about appropriation, or honoring the cultural knowledge. Therefore, data collected was through unrecorded conversations, but the stories resurfaced my historic childhood memories, with some creativity the project recordings formed. It was difficult but after each conversation, ceremonial participation, and long storytelling sessions I collected as best as possible. This was a complicated process for those who convocated within the study, they traveled with me to the storytelling sessions and ceremonial practices because they lacked transportation. However, I recognize the lifeline of this research was consistent with Diné protocols and protected the integrity of relationship (K'é).

Much of this research draws upon my own memories as a Diné raised within the protocol before experiencing assimilation through missionary's boarding school era. The relational research in this study reawakened my experiences with the teachings of the Dyin'

Diné (Holy People), and with my childhood participation in the nightly storytelling, and cultural life that had been dormant and disrupted for many years. This research holds memory not to be considered abstract, or subjective but legitimate knowledge grounded in lived experience and relational accountability to the work and the Diné people. It has also led to a theological interpretation that locates the knowledge of Creator God within Diné concepts of K'é (relationality), and Ho'zho (peace, harmony, balance, beauty), comparable to the ancient Israelite understanding of God expressed through Shalom and their epistemology. With this lens, Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón— a complete balance, harmony, peace, beauty— emerges as a distinctly Diné theological term that can be meaningfully articulated within the Christian faith. This lens shows principles that are consistent with Diné tribal epistemology that formed identity. It is centered in relationality, accountability, and balanced confidence that Creator God is in the relationship.

Definition and Delimitations, and Limitations

Definitions

- *Hózhó*—harmony, balance, beauty, peace.
- *Hózhóón*—is in the completeness of harmony, balance, beauty, peace. Both *Hózhó* and *Hózhóón* hold the same levels of meaning within the Hebrew word Shalom.
- *K'é*—relational, relationship, kinship, interconnectedness.
- *Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón*—Sa'ah means old or maturing word(s) that help reach fullness of life. Naagha'ii' means traveling on earth, or the path of life. Bik'eh

means because of that or based upon. Hózhóón means complete harmony, balance, beauty, peace.

- *Yá'át'ééh*—Means Hello, or in some cases, All is well
- *Yéii Bi Cheii* —a ceremonial deity dance, held only in Winter season and was appropriate for the time of the research
- *Diné Bike'yah* –translated Navajo land, literal translation is 'people walked these lands'
- *Diné* —means People of the land, People of these lands, or just People.
- *Diyin Diné* —Holy People, Navajos do not call those who have passed ancestors, they are referred to as Holy People and not with the implication of a deity but rather as those who crossed into the next life.
- *Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani*—The original traditional name of Creator God
- *Diyin Ts'ida'Ala'ahdi A'te'ii*—The Christian way of saying Creator God, the Most Holy One Above All
- *Níłch'i*—Holy Wind
- *Níłch'i Diyinii* —Holy Spirit in Christian terms
- *Ni'hodilhil*—First World or Dark world
- *Ni'ho dooteizh*—Second World or Blue world
- *Ni'haltsooi*— Third World or Yellow world
- *Nihodizį*— Fourth World or Glitter world
- *Ált*s*é Hastiin*—First Man
- *Ált*s*é 'Asdzáá* —First Woman
- *Nitsáhákees*—thinking, cognitively

- *Nahat'á*—means planning in every part of life
- *Iiná*—means living life
- *Siihasin*—means hope or assured of what has become
- *Tsisnaajini*—Charcoal streak in the middle of the mountain or Mount Blanco Peak
- *Tsoodził*—Turquoise mountain or Mount Taylor
- *Dok'o'oosłíid*—Yellow Peak or San Francisco Peak
- *Dibe'Ntsaa*—Big Horn Sheep mountain or Hesperus Peak
- *Ha'a'Dóone'é*—Where one emerged from or come from, it is reference to the Diné clan system, or origin of family
- *Kinyaa'áání*—Towering House People clan
- *Honágháahnii*— One Who Walks Around People clan
- *Tó Dích'íí' Níí*— Bitter Water People clan
- *Hashtł'ish nii*— Mud People clan
- *Naałtsoos Sání*—Old Paper, the Navajo Treaty with government
- *Hózhǫ́ Náhásdlį́į*—It has become beautiful again, or harmony, balance has come back to the people

Delimitations and Limitations

This project is intentionally delimited to align with the Diné culture, spiritual practices, and relational ethics of the people.

First, the study does not utilize audio recording, photography, or written notes during conversations, ceremonies, and community interactions. Many Diné participants do not consent

to such forms of documentation, their preferences are honored to maintain relational accountability, trust, and cultural propriety. So, all reflections drawn rely on my lived experience, and memory. Reflection only took place after leaving our shared space.

Second, this project does not attempt to reproduce forms of traditional storytelling. Certain ancestral narratives are held in sacred trust, restricted to particular seasons, contests, and ceremonial practitioners. They are not intended for academic circulation or public analysis. This is to avoid cultural appropriation, distortion, or the perception of intellectual theft which is a historical pattern that causes deep harm. This study limits itself to narrative elements that are only publicly sharable, openly taught, or already part of the researcher's personal upbringing within the community context. Any sacred stories that fall outside of these boundaries will not be used.

Third, this study does not explore ceremonial practices or teachings outside of their seasonal or bound ritual cycles. Diné wisdom is deeply embedded in the rhythms of seasons, cosmology, and communal responsibility thus any material shared must correspond with a season.

Finally, this project does not claim to represent the entirety of Diné tradition or the full spectrum of Native Christian experience within the United Methodist denomination or any other denomination. Instead, it reflects a methodological approach shaped by the author's lived experience, and a commitment to understand K'é (relationality), to walk in Hózhó (harmony), that maintains Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, beauty.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORY

The Diné people (Navajo) primarily reside in the southwestern United States, particularly in the Four Corners region where "Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and [Colorado], covering over 27,000 square miles of unparalleled beauty. Diné Bikéyah or Navajoland, is larger than 10 of the 50 states in America."[2] While this area contains the highest concentration of Diné communities, the Diné are not limited to these states, their populations also exist in Nevada and California, where many have established homes and livelihoods.

The Navajo Nation is one of the largest tribal groups in the United States, with "an ever-increasing population that now surpasses 250,000,"[3] and it remains among the most culturally intact Native American nations today. The Navajo language, traditions, and spiritual practices continue to be observed with minimal influence from external cultures.

The Navajos call themselves Diné, which translates into English as "the People" or the "People of these lands," even "Earth People."[4] Their emergence to the southwest has two explanations, an archaeological theory and the mythological Diné creation story. First drawing from Stan Sager's discussion in Four Corners, Where the Holy Spirit Touches Navajo Hearts, a common scholarly explanation for Diné emergence into the Southwest is established in the archaeological and linguistic research. This scientific theory suggests that the Diné migrated into the Southwest regions of North America through a lengthy process of movement beginning

[2] "History," Yá'át'ééh: The Official Site of the Navajo Nation, accessed December 12, 2025, https://www.navajo-nsn.gov/History.
[3] "History."
[4] Stan Sager, *Four Corners: Where the Holy Spirit Touches Navajo Hearts* (Providence House, 2007), 5, 13.

thousands of years ago tracing back to the Bering Strait theory, where early people are believed to have crossed from Asia during the Ice Age. One link to this theory is language, for Stan views "Navajos are part of what is called the pre-Athabascan linguistic group."[5] The language of the Diné people suggests a connection to various words "common to a family of languages spoken by natives found primarily in Alaska and western Canadian"[6] Indigenous tribes, particularly with the Diné people who hold a totally different meaning. Though Stan Sager's discussion of the scientific theories framing the journey in terms of ice bridges, migration, and language families the Diné themselves tell a different story.

The Diné mythological creation narrative is not merely a story of origins but a sacred account of emergence, in which the Diné journeyed upward through successive worlds under the guidance of the *Diyin Diné*, (the Holy People) and *Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani* (Creator God). The Holy People are regarded as ancestors in a biological and historical sense and are sacred, whose spiritual agency precedes and sustains Diné existence. While they are not perceived as deities, they actively dwell within the spiritual realm and participate in the ordering of the world, in ways that may be analogously compared to the biblical understanding of angelic beings or the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1), or the "saints" as Matthew 27: 52, 52 records. It is through their (the Holy People) presence and guidance that the Diné creation narrative unfolds.

In the creation narrative, emerging into the present Fourth World, Diné were placed within the geography of the southwest parts of America, known as the Four Corners, and cradled by four sacred mountains. Each world created began with Creator God (Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani) who blew *Nílch'i* (Holy Wind) into the atmosphere of the earth. Creating

[5] Sager, *Four Corners*, 7.
[6] Sager, *Four Corners*, 7.

order from chaos into the First World called *Ni'hodilhil*, it was a dark or black world inhabited by spiritual insect beings and the first setting of natural laws manifested. *Altse' Hastiin* (First Man) and *Altse' Asdzaa'n* (First Woman) were created from the ground wrapped in white and yellow corn husk and the blowing of Níłch'i (Holy Wind) from Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) gave life, not only to *Altse' Hastiin* (First Man) and *Altse' Asdzaa'n* (First Woman), but to the entire World. However, the First World was destroyed by the living, because they were not observing the natural laws. Then the upward merging to the Second World (*Ni'hodooteizh*) began. This world known in English as the Blue World, it became populated by the insect beings, birds, and mammals. It was, also, where the coyote assists the living with confusions in life, and the atmosphere spirited beings warned the newcomers to obey natural laws, so balance, harmony, peace, and beauty would endure but they fell short of such commandments. So, the world was destroyed by ice. Then one of the insect scraped a path up to the Third World (*Ni'haltsooi*). This world known in English as the Yellow World and had pure water, but it was inhabited by monsters who were destroying life of all living beings. It was in this world the Diné twins, Monster Slayer and Child Born of Water were born to White Shell Woman, who now after giving birth to the twins, began her identity as Changing Woman. Her sons, the twins went through four ceremonies before meeting their deity father, who armed the twins with special powers to fight these monsters and saved Diné the people. However, the yellow World eventually faced destruction by a great flood. The disrespecting and disobedience of natural laws was again the causing effects of the flood. Once more, the insects, birds, four legged and two legged merged upward to the Fourth World (Nihodizį). This world is known in English as the Glitter World or White World. It is where Altse' Hastiin (First Man) and Áłtsé Asdzaa (First Woman) became leaders, and the atmosphere spirit along with spiritual beings of insects

reemerged to help protect the new arrivals from giants. This World marks the beginning of modern humans and the re-establishment of K'é (relationality), Hózhó (harmony), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, and beauty. This narrative of the Diné people is not a migration or linguistic connection but a spiritual emergence, it is one that anchors the Diné to a land through covenantal relationship with Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God), the Diyin Diné (Holy People), and all the relatives this world.

White Shell Woman

> White Shell woman was the first human created, before Altse' Hastiin (First Man) and Altse' Asdzaa'n (First Woman), but soon after they was created too, by *Diyin Ts'ida'Ala'ahdi A'te'ii* (Creator, the most Holy One Above All, a Christian name for God). She helped the Diné become who they are in the creation of these fourth world. She became Changing Woman when she had her twin boys. They help save our people.
>
> —Thomas Tsosie Sr. (Diné)[7]

In connection with the teachings of White Shell Woman, the Diné understand themselves not only as People of the Earth but as members of an interrelated clan system that gives every person a rightful place within the community. This system, given from sacred instruction, organizes K'é (the relationship) that shapes one's belonging, responsibilities, authority, and disposition. Through K'é (relational), this system identity is never isolated, it is always held within the network of relatives, the Holy People, the land, and Creator God.

[7] Thomas Tsosie Sr. (medicine man and author's deceased grandfather), oral teaching, 1965-68.

In the introduction of oneself, after saying *Yá'át'ééh* (Hello). The people or audience question, "*Ha'a'Dóone'é*?" which translates "Where do you emerge from?" or "Where do you come from?" The questioning comes directly out of this clanship teaching of White Shell. It calls a person to name their family origins and the social identity formed through the clans. To answer the people's questioning, "Ha'a'Dóone'é?" is to affirm your place within the narrative that came before you and the relationships that sustain you now. It is a reminder that emergence is not only a moment in time but an ongoing connection to those who shape your family's origins and responsibility within the larger Diné community.

In this way, identity becomes a lived confidence of belonging. The assurance that you remain steady and healthy in the family and social structure. As a person grows, the teaching strengthens confidence so that when life becomes difficult the clan system continues to affirm you as family and as a person with a sense of purpose. It becomes the understanding that your story fits within the larger narrative of the Diné people. To have this identity means that the question, "Who are you, and from where did you emerge?" – is one that as a child or an adult, you can answer with honesty and dignity that you belong to a family in this world, where you will never be homeless.

The teaching from White Shell Woman is so powerful that she is recognized as one of the first Holy People. She embodies the Diné narration of creation, renewal, and harmony that sustain rightful living. As a Holy Person, White Shell Woman created the first four clans and connected them within the four sacred mountains. The clans are the foundation of many other clans that later developed through family origins, geographic ties, and intertribal relationships that continue today. Out of the four original clans were each given distinct lineage, responsibilities, and gifts.

As White Shell Woman laid out the clans, she did so in a cardinal order, starting from the east naming the Towering House People (*Kinyaa'aní*). She entrusted them with leadership. Then moved toward the south, she gave them the clan The One Who Walks Around People (*Hona'gha'ahnii*), they are entrusted with healing. Next from the west, the Bitter Water People (*Tó Dích'íí' Níí*), who are entrusted with teaching. Finally, from the north the Mud People (*Hash tł'ish nii*), entrusted with perceiving beauty. These blessed clans established a kinship that not only shaped generations but also guide Diné individuals to recognize the importance of their place called "K'é (kinship, relationship, interconnectedness), it forms confidence to identity, sustains moral and ethical values. [Currently], it remains a profound expression of integrity, honor, and identity that continues to shape Diné life."[8] It becomes the understanding that your story fits within the larger narrative of the Diné people and creation.

The clans established a sacred network of kinship, an interconnectedness of all living forms given within four sacred mountains boundaries and sacredness to shadow paths of Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, and beauty—or holiness.

The four sacred mountains came about during the Fourth World narrative, were Diyin Diné (the Holy People) erupted them in their cardinal order, to teach the Diné people to live in Hózhó (harmony and balance). Each mountain holds significant value in direction, color, sacred stone, and stages of Diné life.

The first mountain to the east, the Diyin Diné (Holy People) positioned Mount Blanco Peak (*Tsisnaajini*), currently known to be located in the southeast of Colorado. Tsisnaajini is associated with the color white, symbolizing purification, and new beginning. It is linked with

[8] Thomas Tsosie Sr., oral teaching.

the sacred white shell and where White Shell Woman along with Altse' Hastiin (First Man) and Altse' Asdzaa'n (First Woman) were created. The white shell was consecrated by Diyin Diné (Holy People) to the mountain with a lightning bolt. Tsisnaajini powerful teachings are often referred in many ceremonial practices for healing and spiritual cleansing along with the white shell used as an element.

The second mountain, Mount Taylor (*Tsoodził*) sits in the south parts of New Mexico along a small city called Grants, still known as Diné Bi'K'éyaa (Navajo land). It is associated with turquoise or blue stone, symbolizing the daytime sky, growth, and fertility. Turquoise being the sacred stone and is tied to the summer season. The turquoise stone was consecrated by the Holy People with a sunbeam and became another element for ceremonial practices. Tsoodził (Mount Taylor) serves a crucial role in planting and harvesting ceremonies.

Then the third mountain to the west stands San Francisco Peak (*Dok'o'oosłíid*), in the state of Arizona, connected to another small city called Flagstaff. Dok'o'oosłíid is aligned with the color yellow and known as a source of strength, wisdom, prosperity, and leadership. The sacred stone is the Abalone Shell, and the autumn season is associated with stages of adulthood. The abalone shell was consecrated by the Holy People with the sunbeam during the evening twilight.

Lastly, the fourth mountain in the north is Hesperus Peak (*Dibe'Ntsaa*) located in the southcentral mountains of Colorado. Dibe'Ntsaa is associated with the color black, from the night fall or shortness of the sun, as during winter season. It also signifies the completion of life's circle. Its sacred stone is Obsidian consecrated by the Holy People with the northern lights (Aurora, sometimes thought of as a rainbow). To the Diné people, each sacred peak holds significance teaching of balance to life, death, and hope.

All four mountains are not only geographical boundaries, to the Diné they are also living sections, where deities and Diyin Diné (Holy People) assure promises to life, identity, and spiritual guidance. They are a significant covenant from the deities and the Diyin Diné (Holy People) to the Diné people. These narrations of clans, sacred mountains, and presence of the Holy People assure a Diné of the divine's presence. It is a place where Diné people feel cradled. It converts possibilities to embody Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon (complete balance, harmony, peace, beauty).

However, this knowledge of life has been fractured through the historical invasion, the era of colonization, cultural suppression, and missionary domination, each sought to redefine or diminish Diné identity. Where the old ways of Diné life have been disrupted, and Diné people continue to live in the pains of colonization, cultural erasure, and missionary influence. The struggle now is the tension between sacred stories that harmonize and preserve identity, and the competing narratives of the "White Man's gospel." Diné people within traditions, Christian and non-Christian, face distortion in life and faith that have resulted in their disorientation of identity.

Background of the Study

Hwe'eldi [hardship] was a place of dread and fear

That's where they went, not knowing where it was,

Not knowing what was going to happen to them, and

not knowing if they would ever come back to the land.

—Virginia Burnham (Diné)[9]

The most devastating disruption came in 1864, when the U.S. Cavalry launched a campaign to subdue the Diné people and force them from their homeland, a land they understood as holy consecrated by the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). This campaign set in motion the Long Walk, a tragic march of exile that left deep wounds on Diné identity and memory. The campaign was led by Kit Carson, who militantly initiated a scorched-earth strategy, destroying corn fields, orchards, and livestock to starve the Diné into submission. Families were captured, villages were burned, and survival became impossible within the sacred mountains that have defined Diné identity for centuries.

Those who were taken were forced on what has become known as the Long Walk—the brutal march of more than three hundred miles to Bosque Redondo in Fort Summer in the eastern part of New Mexico. Where seven thousand or more of Diné people were compelled to walk in harsh conditions with little to almost no food, water, or shelter. Many perished to exhaustion, exposure, or violent behavior from the soldiers. Upon arrival at Bosque Redondo, the Diné people were confined to a barren and unfamiliar landscape that lacked the resources necessary to live. Hunger, diseases from the military soldiers, and despair became a constant reality of trauma with their removal from their sacred mountains, Diyin Diné (Holy people) and the presence of Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

The Long Walk and the years of imprisonment at Bosque Redondo remains one of the most profound disruptors in Diné history. This forced displacement was not only an assault on

[9] Virginia Burnham, exhibit at Bosque Redondo Memorial, Fort Sumner, New Mexico, visited July 2025. The following historical details of the Long Walk and Bosque Redondo imprisonment are drawn from the memorial's exhibits, educational displays, and site interpretation from Virginia Burnham.

the physical survival but also a direct attempt to sever them from the spiritual geography that grounded their identity with the sacred mountains, Dyin Diné (Holy People), Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), and ceremonies of holiness that defined the lifestyle of the Diné world. The traumatic historical memory of the Long Walk and imprisonment at Bosque Redondo continues to shape the Diné cultural identity, reflecting deep wounds of spiritual powers, displacement, and the enduring resilience of a people determined to survive.

When the Diné people were finally released from Bosque Redondo in 1868, through the signing of what Diné call *Naałtsoos Sání* (Old Paper, Treaty), the disturbances of confinement were just beginning. The failure of Bosque Redondo experiment had become an undeniable failure as the federal officials recognized that the confinement could not continue. The Diné and Washington, D.C. leaders, came to an agreement and secured it in a legal settlement. A written treaty that echoes the devastation of the Diné of the Long Walk, failed crops, disease, and a near erasure of a people. To read the words of the treaty is to encounter not only terms to return to the sacred mountains, but also the acknowledgment of a campaign that amounted to "ethnic cleansing."[10]

The Naałtsoos Sání (the Old Paper, treaty) was not without controversy. The lands restored represented only a portion of Diné Bikéyah (Navajo land), and the United States demanded changes that reflected its assimilationist agenda. Article VI of the treaty, for example, required that Diné children to attend federal schools, where they would be taught to abandon their own language, culture, and religious practices to be considered civilized Christian citizens. Yet even with these limitations, the return home was a profound victory. Unlike so many

[10] *Treaty Between the United States of America and the Navajo Tribe of Indians*, June 1, 1868, on display at the Navajo Nation Museum, Window Rock, Arizona.

Indigenous nations forced far from their homelands, the Diné walked back to the cradling care of their sacred mountains, the Diyin Diné (Holy People's), and to Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) presence. The Treaty of 1868 became both a scar and a source of strength as the Diné used the suffering of the Long Walk, and imprisonment of Bosque Redondo as a testament to their resilience, prayers to the Holy People and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) that formed their sovereignty that now is central to their identity.

While the Treaty of 1868 marked a return to Diné Bikéyah (Navajo land), it also exemplified the larger federal agenda of assimilation. The mandate that Diné children attend government schools foreshadowed the policies of culture erasure that would expand nationwide into other Indigenous communities. Leaders such as "General William Tecumseh Sherman, who negotiated the treaty, and Commissioner of Affairs E.A. Hayt (under whom reforms accelerated), advanced the expansion of federally controlled education as primary tools of assimilation."[11]

By the 1870s, this vision took institutional form in schools like Haskell Institute in Kansas and Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879 by the infamous figure U.S. Army Captain Richard Henry Pratt. Whose philosophy was encapsulated in his chilling remarks to "Kill the Indian in him and save the man."[12] It was a philosophy that explicitly sought to strip Native children of their languages, cultural traditions, religious practices, and identities under

[11] Bosque Redondo Memorial, Fort Sumner, New Mexico, July 2025.
[12] R. H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction at the Nineteenth Annual Session Held in Denver, Col., June 23-29, 1892*, ed. Isabel C. Barrows (Boston, 1892): 46, https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/default/files/docs-resources/CIS-Resources_1892-PrattSpeech.pdf.

the guise of education. The treaty's provisions were setting a stage for a new struggle over land, and the survival of Indigenous people.

The disruption of life for the Diné intensified from the Treaty of 1868, as it may have promised protection but instead paved the way of control. The devastation of assimilation emerged, though it allowed the Diné to return from the Long Walk imprisonment, it confined their lifestyle under federal oversight and laid the foundation for future democracy. The ideology of assimilation grew and meant that the Diné would be forced into a false and devastating choice to adopt the identity of a White Christian American as defined by the White government through mission boarding schools or to cling to Diné traditions that had been labeled evil and doomed.

Assimilation was not only the breaking of families, language, and ceremonial practices it was an assault on confidence of identity, casting doubt on whether one could be both Diné and Christian or Diné and a civilized American. Its most destructive power lay in the psychological violence within each Diné person. It is designed to unravel the very sense of being Diné. A People who are created for Hózhó (harmony), to live in beauty, balance with all living things, and a sacred relation called K'é (relatives), and in the cradling of the four sacred mountains with the Holy People and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) which all leads to a place known as Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete balance, harmony, peace, beauty.

Consequently, from an early age, Diné children who were once taught by their elders the sacred ways of the Diné people were now jeopardized. The teachings of their Diyin Diné (Holy People), their relationship with Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), the stories of Changing Woman, and the caring of land cradle by the four sacred mountains that framed their homeland were now governed by U.S. government institutions forming assimilation policies sought to

sever as a war against Diné culture. Children were removed from their families and sent to distant Christian boarding schools, where they were not permitted to speak *Diné bizaad* (Navajo language) and those who did were violently punished. Traditional clothing was stripped and replaced with military style clothing as acceptable within White Christian society. Their long hair that proved dignity, courage, and strength was cut to conform to White American style. In the quiet classroom a deeper violence took place that contributed to the erasure of their identity. In the imposed silence, Diné children learned to see their own culture as something that leads to a place never heard of before, Hell. From such a time and setting, a generation grew up carrying the weight of shame and disconnect. The most devastating consequence of assimilation was not only the loss of language or customs, but rather the destruction of their human spirit.

Adding to the government policies and the rupturing of human spirit, was the consuming presence of Christian missionaries whose work the spiritual extension of assimilation. The government boarding school were frequently denominationally run institutes and their work of conversion to Christianity was presented as a cultural cleansing with teachings in morality and spiritual improvement that would save the children from perceived sins of their own culture. In the teaching of Christ, these missionaries continued the suppression of Diné practices and interpreted sacred ceremonies and oral traditional stories that brought Hózhó (harmony) as evil obstacles to salvation rather than "good news" of expression to a spiritual worldview. This created a complex and painful intersection of the teaching of Christ's love and compassion that are intertwined with policies, culture, and spiritual loss. For many Diné the Christian conversations were not a religious act but continued to be inseparable from the broader systemic imperial habits that displaced identity and family that once gave meaning to the sacredness of a

harmonized relationship embedded to all living things, including the universe, the earth, Diyin Diné (Holy People), and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

The violence of assimilation is not only rooted in government policies and broken promises of the treaties but continues under federal control and Christian theology. For the Diné people, Christianity and the Treaty of 1868 both symbolize survival and subjugation. Survival in the fact that Diné have returned from their Long Walk into a portion of their four sacred mountains, and subjugation in terms of the sovereignty restrictions placed in the Treaty. The dual strategy in the Treaty imposes dependency and pressures each Diné person to assimilate and bring into reality Captain Pratt's dictum, "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."[13] Assimilation provides the ultimate justification to Missionaries' efforts that in Christ the Diné people need to dismantle their language, ceremonies, belief in the Diyin Diné (the Holy People), in Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), in Hózhó (harmony and balance), and their K'é philosophy to survive and flourish in White Christian American culture. It is of great wonder, then, that for many Diné people and other Indigenous people view the gospel and hold its remembrance as the "ugly White Man's gospel." A message of "good news," has become entangled with cultural suppression rather than liberation. The violent history frames the purpose of the present study, to re-examine the gospel through a Diné lens, to uncover ways of interpretation that honor Diné spirituality and restore dignity to Christ's story. The hope and significance of such work lie in the potential to disentangle faith from oppression and to recover a vision to Christianity that resonates with the beauty of K'é, (relation), Ho'zho' (harmony,

[13] Pratt, "Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," 46.

balance, peace, beauty), in hopes to gain Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete balance, harmony, peace, and beauty.

Purpose of the Study

It is from the Diné history of breaches that presents this study's direction. The purpose is to reconsider the gospel of Christ Jesus through a Diné hermeneutical lens, one that does not erase Diné spirituality but listens to it as a living dialogue. By doing so, this research seeks to uncover ways in which Diné ideology, traditions, and mythological creation stories reveal dimensions of Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) that the Western Christians may have overlooked. The significance of such work is more than historical repentance or reconciliation of the church but reclaiming a gospel that can be heard not as an instrument of assimilation but as good news that honors K'é (relational), Hózhó (balance, harmony), and moves in a traditional understanding of Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, and beauty. In retelling the story of Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) through Diné eyes, this study challenges the legacy of the "ugly White Man's gospel" and movements toward a faith that restores dignity, harmony, and confidence in being fully Diné (Navajo) and Christian.

Methodology: A Diné Hermeneutic and Epistemology

Grounded in K'é (relationality), Hózhó (harmony), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii' Bik'eh Hózhóón—a complete balance, harmony, peace, and beauty—this study can be a pilot in pointing to a hermeneutic lens that offers a Diné worldview towards the gospel of Christ Jesus. Because the gospel of Jesus Christ often translates to beauty, balance, harmony, and salvation

within the Diné contextual existence. It connotates rightful living within the interconnected narratives of Diné existence stories. The interpretive understanding of Creator God and Christ arise from the sacred orientation of the Diné creation story, using the four directions, recognizing boundaries set by the four sacred mountains, carrying the teachings from the Dyin Diné (Holy People), as each ties into a fundamental process of life and thought.

Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon, for many Diné people, names the ultimate fulfillment of life, a way of being marked by confidence, balance, and harmony within the totality of the universe. It is a traditional Diné theological expression that speaks of restoration and redemption, articulating a vision of wholeness that is both lived and held sacredly. In this sense, Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon may be read comparatively with the Christian sense of salvation (soteriology), and not as philosophy or syncretism view, but as the ongoing realization of wholeness, right relationship, and continuity to pietism.

In this research, Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon functions both theologically and formatively. It draws upon Diné educational philosophy articulated by Diné College, where their students learning process is structured according to the four cardinal movements of "*Nitsáhákees* (thinking), *Nahat'á* (planning), *Iiná* (living), and *Siihasin* (assurance)."[14] And students are first invited to engage critically and rationally with knowledge (East), then to discern purposeful direction (South), to embody what is learned through lived practice (West), and finally to reflect upon these experiences to sense one's identity and responsibility (North). Within this approach, education is not neutral or abstract, it becomes a sacred process of life. In dialogue with Christian theology, this pedagogical path may be understood comparatively as a

[14] "The Educational Philosophy of Diné College: Sa'ah Naagháíí Bik'eh Hózhóón," Diné College, accessed May 24, 2025, https://www.dinecollege.edu/about-us/educational-philosophy.

path of formation towards restoration and rightful relationship (K'é). It is what Christian theology names salvation, and also what is envisioned from the path of Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon. These teaching are not abstract lessons but dynamic spiritual guidelines of how Diné people understand and embody holy wisdom. The cycle echoes engagement of human experience, movements in the cosmos, and movements in the spiritual world. As these principles are lived in experience, they generate peace for the individual to exist harmoniously within a community, balance in the natural world, and sustain a holistic spiritual formation.

Hózhó is a way of life characterized by beauty, harmony, balance, peace, and rightful relationship with all existing. It is not based on feelings or good character, it is an ontological condition and an ethical orientation taught by elders, who were inspired by the Diyin Diné (Holy People), the Diné creation narrative, mythology of the four sacred mountains, ceremonies, and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). It is living rightfully with one's community and clan system, one's body, mind, and soul. Hózhó is not passive movements of peace, it is to be maintained, restored when one falls away for the order, it is to walk in every moment of the day in rightful relationship. It is a lens that names the original sacred order of creation in the Garden of Eden, and the commandment of its ongoing process of living in beauty, harmony, balance, and rightful relationship with self, all existing, and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), who gave as a rightful participation from the beginning. To live Hózhó means to present quality love, protect it, and partake in it with all existing that reflects the active generative work of imago Dei that Creator God gave in the very beginning. When in the realm of Hózhó peace, harmony, balance, and beauty is noticeable, and life is gifted.

In this research, K'é, Hózhó, and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon provide the foundational hermeneutical lens and starting point. It allows us to build on the Diné theological

view through which life is understood traditionally and as practical participation in harmony, balance, peace, to where beauty becomes a sacred order. Traditionally, this hermeneutic lens is taught through elders, grandparents, and medicine people in narrative sessions, ceremonies, or prayer. The narrative begins with the universe and is understood as sustained by Diyin Diné (Holy People) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). From these narrative sessions K'é (relationality), Hózhó, and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon are not merely ethical principles but a sacred reality in which life of human, non-human, and the cosmic coherence in relationship that protects one's spiritual formation. In this lens there is an understanding of sacred identity. As it has led to some medicine people, who have taught, the term Diné'é itself gestures toward the divine and human relationship, expressing humanity's origin in and reflection of Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). To live as Diné'é, then, is to live within a sacred calling of thinking, acting, and existing in conscious relation to the presence of Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), who is woven throughout the universe and once understood, one is embodied in Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon.

This theological lens, then, does not remain abstract or cosmological, it becomes visible, practical, and sustained through relationships. It is at this place that Diné theology turns decisively toward K'é' (relationality). K'é' provides the relational voice by which Hózhó and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon order are interpreted, embodied, and transmitted. The following chapter turns to K'é' as the primary hermeneutic through which Diné theology understands identity, responsibility, and the lived practice of Hózhó and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon.

CHAPTER 2: RELATIONAL, KINSHIP, COMMUNAL, K' é

You always give to your mother's clan first, then your dad's,
then move to your mother's father (*Cheii*),
and then finish with your father's father (*Nalii*).
—Thomas Tsosie Sr. (Diné)

Relations

In Diné greetings, right after saying Yá'át'ééh (Hello), the question Ha'a'Dóone'é (Where did you emerge from? Or Where did you come?) is asked. It is not an only a social courtesy but a theological and communal inquiry. The question calls for a person to locate themselves within the narrative of emergence of the living network of K'é', a relationship system that binds individuals to family, clan, the earth, creation narrative, and the Diyin Diné (Holy People). It immediately identifies the individual beyond their isolated self and into a relational identity shaped by origin of Diné creation narratives and responsibility.

The narrative K'é (relational) is not a mythic past, it is a living web system that orders social life. In the creation narrative, White Shell Woman's establishment of the first four clans that provided more than a system of descent. She formed the moral and spiritual foundation in Diné society. Through the clan system, Diné people are given a place in the world, given guidance of how to relate, how one protects and participates in creation. How one honors and how one contributes to Hózhó (balance, harmony, peace, beauty) and establish a path to Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon (a place of complete harmony).

Therefore, this self-introduction does not end with Ha'a'Dóone'é (where you're from) but opens into a larger knowledge of K'é' (relationality). To name one's clan, beginning with their mother's clan, is to declare one's true identity, to acknowledge the maternal line as the source of life and belonging, to acknowledge one's responsibility. The clan identification situates a person within an extended family that reaches back to the time of creation and outward to the present community, thus leaving no one homeless. To say where one is from is to affirm one's sacred origin as a human, one's obligation to others, and one's rightful way of being Diné.

The relational (K'é) concept is a gift, rising from a decisive moment within Diné creation narrative, when White Shell Woman sought to place order among the Diné people. She intentionally formed the first four clans. In doing so, she established a sacred foundation of relationality, a living structure through which identity, kinship, and communal life could take shape. The living structure gives accountability, responsibility, and an active participation within creation. It gives knowledge that we do not own any part of creation, rather we are participants of a holy order.

According to the tradition, White Shell Woman established the clan system and authorized its continuation as a sacred structure for Diné life. In a decisive act within the creation narrative, She entrusted and gifted the first four clans in cardinal order, commissioning them to carry forward her teachings of relationship. These original clans are *Kinyaa'aní* (Towering House People from the east), *Hona'gha'ahnii* (One Who Walks Around People, form the south), *To'dich'ii'nii* (Bitter Water People from the west), and *Hash'tlish nii* (Mud People from the north). Each clan was oriented to their directional order and commissioned to embody and transmit the teachings of the four sacred mountains. Through this ordered relational (K'é)

system, K'é (relationship) is kept alive, making it possible to pursue Hózhó (harmony) and the continuing fulfillment of Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete harmony, balance, peace, beauty.

In presenting the first four clans, White Shell Woman also gifted each clan as a sacred trust. In the east, She spoke into existence Kinyaa' a' anii (Towering House People), entrusting them with the gift of leadership. They were commissioned to guide the people with wisdom, humility, and responsibility, orienting the community each morning toward the dawn for prayers and offering of corn pollen. Then directing herself to the south, she spoke to the Hona' gha' ahnii (One Who Walks Around People), gifting them with the responsibility of healing. They were entrusted to walk among the people to restore harmony, to tend to the wounded, mending relationship, and sustaining the well-being of the people.

Then to the west, White Shell Woman commissioned the To'Di'Ch'ii' nii (Bitter Water People) as teachers. They are entrusted to carry knowledge, to instruct the people to live in right relationship with all existing life and to sustain life through wisdom handed down from the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). Lastly, to the north, she addressed the Hash tł'ish nii (Mud People), blessing them with the gift of seeing beauty. They are to help Diné to recognize beauty even in hardship, to affirm what has come into being is beautiful, and to call the people back to Hózhó.

Within this context K'é (relationality) formed, where it provides a basic and primary hermeneutical lens that provides a journey through relationship, understanding of divinity, and Scripture. It is a place where one can be embraced by Diné pedagogy. Where K'é (relationality), is not merely a social ethic or kinship term, it names an understanding of existence as in the functionality and relationality of life. In Diné thought and knowledge, nothing comes into being

in isolation, but rather in relationality (K'é). Where humanity, the earth, the Diyin Diné (Holy People), and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) are bound together within an interdependent structure of life that originates in the sacred order of creation given by Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). To speak of K'é (relationship), then is to speak of a way of seeing and interpreting the world that one's identity, purpose, and knowledge is arising from within relationship, even with Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). Through this lens K'é (relationship, creation is not an object to be analyzed or controlled but a living network of kinships in which all beings hold place, responsibility, and sacred worth.

Through K'é, then, it orients towards a relational ontology in which being itself is communal, inspirational, and sustained through connection. When this wisdom is received and practiced, it does more than interpret life. It is formative, and it gives life. It gives substance and direction to Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete harmony, balance, peace, beauty. It empowers the pursuit of living in Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon and wholeness within the totality of existence. K'é (relationship) also sustains an inner, cognitive orientation, in ways of perceiving oneself and the world that nurtures faith, strengthens spiritual awareness, and grounds Diné people within the sacred order of life. Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), then, is encountered not as distant or solitary, but as relational presence to continually draw humanity, creation, and Diyin Diné (Holy People) into a spiritual realm to restore and sustain relationship. Reading, listening, and meditating on Scripture is engaged at this point and is not primarily abstract doctrine, but a testimony to relational restoration where we are called back into right relationship, responsibility, and Hózhó (balance, harmony, peace, beauty).

Sacred Places

Diné elders, medicine people, and most parents teach that the emergence into the Fourth World is not only the arrival of Diné people, but the formation of a sacred world in which life could be sustained, instructed, and protected. It is in this Fourth World that the Diyin Diné (Holy People) placed the four sacred mountains, not merely to mark as boundaries, but to form a world that could hold the Diné people. The old teachings often speak of these mountains as cradling the people, encircling them in a living enclosure where identity is nurtured, prayers are learned, and relationships are ordered. The sacredness of these mountains arise not from elevation or distance, but for intimacy. They create a world in which the Diné people gather, shelter, and are continually addressed by the presence of the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

The placement of Tsisnaajini (Mount Blanco) in the east, Tsoodził (Mount Taylor) in the south, Dok'o'oosłíid (San Francisco Peak) in the west, and Dibe'Ntsaa (Hesperus Peak) in the north establishes more than directional orientation. Together they shape a sacred geography in which the Diné people are taught how to understand, how to walk, and how to live. Each mountain carries gifts that speak to stages of life and forms of knowledge, maturity, and spiritual endurance so that the earth itself becomes pedagogical. To live within these sacred mountains is to be formed by them. Through such formation, Diné people come to understand life as given, structured, and sustained formation to K'é (relationship). They complete the network of relations binding Diné people to mother earth, the Diyin Diné (Holy People), all of creation and to Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

Holding these sacred mountains together is Níłch'i (Holy Wind) by orders of Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), whose presence permeates all past and present worlds and all

living things. This sacred geography of the earth, Níłch'i is encountered with particular attentiveness and when done, ceremony becomes the most spiritual movement, cradle in the presence of holiness. This gives rise to a kind of cognitive and spiritual tension, where Níłch'i is everywhere, and yet is known as an especially present among these mountains placed by the Diyin Diné (Holy People).

For this reason, the four sacred mountains are held as sacred not simply that they demarcate Diné Bike'yah (Navajo Land), but because they cradle a relational world in which Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God's) life-giving presence is continually mediated through the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and the living breath of Níłch'i (Holy Wind). The sacred mountains form a living covenantal space where the earth, Diné people, and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) dwell in mutual relationship. The Diné people do not just inhabit space, they are held within a world where Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon is possible, where identity is gifted, and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) is known within the vicinity.

When the four sacred mountains are placed in conversation with biblical imagination, what emerges is not shared set of stories, but shared theological instinct where sacred places are relational (K'é) spaces where (Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani) Creator God's presence gathers life into order, responsibility, and communion. In the Old Testament, certain places come to be held as holy not because they contain Creator God, but because they are sites where divine presence is intensely encountered and covenantal relationships (K'é) are formed. Mountains, pillars, sanctuaries, and land function as gathering spaces, where Israel learned how to live in right relationship (K'é) with Creator God, with one another, and with the living world around them.

Within both tribal traditions, Diné and Israel, sacred place is consistently linked to gifts and responsibility. Land is received as covenantal gift. Sacred space becomes the locus of

worship, instruction, reconciliation, and communal (K'é) memory. These places form identity by orienting the people towards presence, obedience, and mutual belonging. Sacred geography then operates relationally (K'é), it binds Creator God and people, people and land, worship, and identity.

This hermeneutic lens resonates deeply with Diné understanding of the four sacred mountains. As the mountains cradle a world ordered by K'é (relationship) and sustained by Níłch'i (Holy Wind), so biblically the sacred places that gathered Israel and Christians into a relational (K'é) world structured by covenant. So, in all three traditions, sacred place is not merely where one goes, but where one is formed. The earth becomes pedagogy. The geography teaches how to live. Such spaces concentrate awareness of Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), intensify relationality (K'é), responsibility, and invites life into Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete harmony, balance, peace, beauty. Through this hermeneutic lens sacred place emerges as a living participant in the moral and spiritual formation of a people called Diné.

Healing

Diné people understand the four sacred mountains as a living circle of stability, established by the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and White Shell Woman, through whom clans, sacred stones, and identity were gifted, forming the foundation of life through K'é (relationality). Within this sacred geography, Diné College has articulated a philosophy of directional well-being that reflects these older teachings: the east as thinking, the south as planning, the west as living, and the north as assurance. These directions do not merely orient

the body, but shape the mind, relationships, and responsibilities of a person within the whole. To live within this sphere of life is to walk in harmony, balance, peace, and beauty (Hózhó), it is where every action in relational holds one accountable and responsible. When one's relationality falls out of K'é (interconnectedness), this sacred orientation is disrupted, producing dislocation within the self, the community, and the earth. It is from this state of imbalance that the need for healing emerges.

These sacred teachings form persons who are responsible and accountable not only to those living within the community, but also to Diyin Diné (Holy People) who gifted these teachings. However, it is important to recognize that not everyone can always maintain harmony, balance, peace, and beauty (Hózhó), or stay within the order of K'é (relationality). When a person steps outside these teachings of relationality (K'é) or harmony, balance, peace, and beauty (Hózhó), they enter what Diné philosophy describes as a condition of confusion, abandonment, and disorientation. It is to experience the ruptured life when one is no longer rightly oriented to Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), Diyin Diné (Holy People, to others, and to the larger order of life.

Although Diné traditions does not speak of "hell" or "Satan," the devastation of this state may be compared, in the Christian ideology, to what the Psalms describe as being "in the pit" (Ps. 88:6) or "walking in darkness" without light (Ps. 143:3-4). However, in both the Psalms and Diné teachings, suffering is not primarily explained as penalty, but as the experience of broken relationships (K'é). Healing begins only when one remembers the covenant of K'é (relationship) and reorients towards divine presence and seeks restoration. Remembrance is the first step to the way back that turns the person again towards the Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

For Diné people, this condition of disharmony may be experienced as physical, but even more so as cognitive, and spiritual disorientation signaling that a person has lost their place in the old teachings of the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and White Shell Woman. At such moments, ceremony, and a retelling of the sacred narratives through chants, creation narrative, and songs set the foundation for the disoriented to be drawn back toward the pathway of origins of K'é (relationality). These narratives are not simply accounts of history, but they articulate the fundamental foundation of identity, belonging, and K'é (relationality) responsibility. The loss of harmony, balance, peace, and beauty (Hózhó), is then never an isolated failure. It involves disruption of K'é (relationality), with Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), Diyin Diné (Holy People, the community, and with the existing relationship with the earth. Ceremonial healing addresses this disordered relationality (K'é) disorder rather than merely the individual condition of, as the Christians would say, sin. Through ceremony, a person is taught again how to think, to plan, to live, and to regain assurance within the sacred narration of Diyin Diné (Holy People) teachings. In this way, restoration is not escaping from the disorientation but relearning how to move rightfully in K'é (relationality) with Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God), Diyin Diné (Holy People, the community, and with the existing earth.

Healing, then, emerges through the recognition that stepping out of harmony, balance, peace, and beauty (Hózhó) is itself the wound and that remembering the sacred narratives is the first movement back toward divine presence, where a person is fully engaged with Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete harmony, balance, peace, beauty. For the Diné Christians, it is a place we call redeemed.

K'é as a Hermeneutic of Salvation

The blanket on the hogan, during ceremony, is not just an entrance
It's a reminder, the doorway to the Holy People.
You must say your ceremonial name, your Navajo name, so they know who you are.
The blanket is a veil connected to the other side.
Say your name, so they know you.
They will remember you from here on.
—Thomas Tsosie Sr. (Diné)

The knowledge of K'é (relationship) is deeply embedded in the Diné pedagogy, it does hold a theological perspective of salvation. K'é names the sacred structure of relationships that binds persons to family, clan, the earth, Diyin Diné (Holy People), and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). It is not merely social kinship, but a moral and spiritual order in which life is received as a gift and lived in responsibility. When salvation is approached through K'é (relationality), it is not understood as escape from White America's Christian education or a moment removed from history, but as the restoration, protection, and deepening of rightful relationship. To be "saved" is to be gathered back into the sacred network of belonging established by Diyin Diné (Holy People), White Shell Woman, and sustained by Níłch'i (Holy Wind) empowered by Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

The Diné narrative of K'é (relationality), when threatened, is not simply wrongdoing but estrangement, stepping outside of relational order that makes life possible. When a person moves beyond K'é boundaries, as given from the old teachings through the sacred mountains, the clan system, and the Diyin Diné (Holy People), they do not just break a rule, they suffer a

breach of K'é (relationship). Disorientation, illness, conflict, and fear arise where relationships are fractured. Salvation, therefore, is needed to address this rupture. Ceremony, prayers, and storytelling function as relational acts. They call a person back into alignment with Diyin Diné (Holy People), the earth, the community, and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). Healing, then, is not private, it is communal and cosmic, because K'é (relationality) is communal and cosmic. It is how all of creation is designed, even Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) is in K'é (relationship) with self.

Seen through this hermeneutic lens, Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete harmony, balance, peace, beauty—does not describe a distant spiritual destination but the relational (K'é) fullness of life. It is the enduring state in which one lives continuously within sacred relationship (K'é). It names the horizon of salvation, a life held within the beauty, order, and vitality that flows from rightful relationship with Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) and creation. Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a complete harmony, balance, peace, beauty—then is where K'é (relationality) is no longer delicate or threatened but sustained. It is salvation not as removed from the world, but as life rightfully woven into it.

Using K'é (relationality) as a hermeneutic lens reshapes how Diné people, Christians and non-Christians, may speak of God's saving work. For in K'é (relationality), Creator God is not first encountered as a distant judge or abstract redeemer, but as One who initiates, desires, and restores relationship. Salvation, then, is the movement of Creator God towards the repairs of K'é (relationality). A Creator God, who is calling persons back into covenantal belonging with the Diyin Diné (Holy People), the earth, and community. This view shows salvation is not foreign to Diné thought, it resonates within the deep structures of Diné theology, where life is sustained by relational accountability and sacred presence.

Through this lens, K’é (relationality) invites Christian theology to speak of salvation as more than individual forgiveness or future hope. It presents salvation as lived, relational reality, a continual returning to one’s place within Creator God’s ordered creation. To know one’s clan, is to honor the mountains, to walk carefully with other, and to remember the teachings of Diyin Diné (Holy People) and White Shell Woman as practices that form salvation. From this perspective, salvation is not only something Creator God accomplishes for a person, but something Creator God continually works within the network of relationships that constitute life itself. So, lift the blanket and say your name!

CHAPTER 3: NARRATIVE OF DISRUPTED IDENTITY

Narrative

After the Long Walk and the imprisonment at Bosque Redondo, the Diné signed a treaty with the United States government that allowed their return to their homeland, the place cradled by the four sacred mountains. The treaty carried promises of peace, land, and supplies but it also laid grounds for federal oversight that extended into nearly every portion of Diné life. Among some of the earliest groups to step into this new order were Christian missionaries, some of whom were authorized by the government as agents. Their task was to bring the Diné into civilized living, an act of colonization. These Christian agents, teachers, and missionaries weaved together civilized living through a new culture, language, and religion. It was all a political colonization through culture and faith that was designed to control.

The missionaries often portrayed themselves as saviors by bringing school, food, and clothing, but their efforts were bound to the government's assimilation agenda. Mission churches and schools soon scattered across Diné country as Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholics, and Mormons. These mission churches and schools did more than bring the good news of the gospel, they became intermediaries, translating government policies into daily demand and guidance for the Diné people to comply with federal expectations. The gospel they brought was filled with cultural baggage of a new language, new morality, and total assimilation.

The most visible expression of this colonization was education. Mission schools increased as governmental boarding schools that took many Diné children from their families and homeland to reshape them into English speaking civilized Christians. The suppression of the Diné language was deliberate, enforced with punishment, and tied to the teaching of the

Bible as the only true redeeming story. In place of their ceremonial songs, prayers, and connection with Diyin Diné (Holy People), children had to recite hymns and scripture passages. The missionaries faithfully believed they were offering salvation to a 'savage' Diné people but instead brought trauma by separation of K'é (relationality), forcefulness of a new identity, and fractured cultural practices that deprived the generations of intergenerational wisdom and knowledge once given by Diyin Diné (Holy People) and White Shell Woman.

In the educational process came the religious conversion in the communities reshaped K'é (relationality). Missionaries preached a doctrine of sin and salvation from the perspective of a legal transaction. All humanity is guilty of sin before God and Christ, but through Christ's death and resurrection the penalty was paid, to where in faith eternal life converts the final destiny. To many Diné, this mindset clashed with their understanding of K'é (relationality), Hozho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—the completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty, yet these missionaries dismissed that Diné worldview and attacked their medicine society people as demonic, from the dark side, and worst, devil worshipers pushing converts to abandon sacred traditions. In this practice, faith was not a bridge but rather became a wedge to divide Diné communities and demean their spiritual heritage of K'é (relationality). In the trueness of Diné ideology, Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a place of complete harmony, balance, peace, and beauty— could never take shape without K'é (relationship), it is still a struggle today to find K'é (relationality) as core identity to redemption.

Above religion, the colonizing practice was not confined to the church or classrooms. Missionaries required compliance, as they preached submission to authority as a Christian virtue (Rom. 13:1-4). The practice of compliance to submission was never the teaching of the

Diné leaders, in fact it is the complete opposite to K'é (relationality). When churches distributed food, clothing, and medicine often there were strings attached by required attendance, participation in Bible studies, and loyalty to mission leadership. Helpful aid became another form of control, persuasion, and binding survival to mission conformity. Yet again, it was completely opposite to K'é (relationality). The old Diné traditional teachings was to be hospitable to all K'é (relatives).

By the twentieth century mission schools and mission churches had become so entrenched on Diné Tah and Diné BiK'éyah (Navajo land), where some Diné families accepted Christianity as their primary religion and will never talk about their Diné culture. Other Diné people resisted or have blended Christianity with their Diné traditions. Currently, some Diné led churches gradually emerged but with a slight reframing of Christianity through their own language and worldview of ceremonial practice order that showed faith could be indigenized even after decades of outside control, but they still fear conversing about their Diné tradition. Though the pattern of spiritual colonization remains visible in the fact that White missionaries still oversee each local church's developmental practicers, theology, and administration.

The missionary era is complex. In one view, it's has imprinted a Christian view of faith and produces a body of believers, who are active today. On the other hand, the cost of losing language, suppression of ceremonial practices, and most damaging are the wounds passed down through generations. However, this story cannot acknowledge the resilience of Diné heritage and spirituality even through the persistence of colonizing pressures. Though the missionaries believe they were saving souls, they really contributed to breaking the Diné view of K'é (relationality), where much of Diné have an independent colonized view of community (K'é)

within themselves. To this day, unfortunately, the teaching of the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and White Shell Woman are almost absent.

The history gives uncomfortable truths of missionaries acting as evangelists of good news rather they became colonizers. Their message was demonized in the political movement of assimilation and developed a structure that continues to dismantle Diné identity, yet the Diné life since the treaty is not one of defeat but of endurance. Through resistance, adaptation, and regrouping, the Diné people carry in their soul of K'é (relationality) in their clan system, creation story, the Diyin Diné (Holy People), White Shell Woman, and connection with Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). Their ceremonies both in the church and traditional settings show healing and salvation still remains through K'é (relationality). And, if both practices can fully grasp Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty is achievable in both theological septum. Then, true identity will surface, and the inner conflicts may end.

Struggles

> If our native ways already had some notion of God's Good News,
> then it becomes important for us to preserve this original wisdom rather than
> blindly consume alien notions of the "Good News" imposed by the missionaries.[15]

In the past and current era, the experience of Diné people are marked by both loss and resilience. The assimilation policies of the United States government and Christian missionaries

[15] Clara Sue Kidwell et al., *A Native American Theology* (Orbis Books, 2001), 65.

continue to push the disrupted centuries of cultural inherited creation stories. As the policies to civilization had risen with boarding schools, the punishment for speaking Diné, and the banning of ceremonial practices sustained deep hopelessness. There are signs of resilience endured within the Diné people, as they learned to walk in two worlds. Adapting to Christianity while still carrying the strength of their ceremonies and stories, the balancing caused disruption to a sense of K'é (relationality). Because the subjugation of the colonizing crusade caused deep disorientation of K'é (relationality) and a gradual desensitizing of cultural identity. As missionaries and colonial authorities pressed Christianity forward, and offering this faith as the only acceptable spiritual formation to Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). The exclusivity not only delegitimized and suppressed inherited traditional narration of the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and White Shell Woman, but it also disconnected the system of K'é (relationality) that once held Diné families and communities together. The pushed obligation, by missionaries theology, of a singular religious path as the only truth created generational wounds, reshaping how families related (K'é) to one another, how ceremonies were abandoned, and how children understanding their place in both their Diné heritage and the Christian faith has been broken. What emerged are the loss of ritual, language, and clarity to the ongoing deep inner traumatic questioning of K'é (relationality), identity, faith, and belonging. This deep rupture of K'é (relationality), ritual, language, and belonging cannot be untangled from the religious presence, for Christianity was not only preached as salvation in Christ but lives as a shadow of control and domination.

The colonizing Christian ideology and practice "is difficult for many Diné to concede efficacy to a system of religious belief which has consistently, over several generations, proven

to be an intimate and symbiotic part of the conquest and the ongoing colonial presence."[16] The colonized Christian ideology fortifies White suprematism and promotes pure racism over holiness. The colonizing Christian ideology is fundamentally misaligned with the Diné philosophy of K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), which emphasizes a path to Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. Because this imposed system of belief has no ground within the Diné cosmology, it remains a disruptive force. It views Diné practices as witchcraft and that mindset has contributed greatly to the struggle among the Diné people. For their cultural survival and spiritual integrity is identified in K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), which emphasizes the journey to Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. At the heart of this disruption lies the intrusion of an ideology that undermined the very fundamental functionality of Diné identity, it is a major step in dehumanizing and dismantling Diné sacred identity.

By the elevating conquest, hierarchy, and exclusivity, that Christianity imposed, many Diné people conceding worth to such a systematic practice find it difficult, for it represents not just a different religion but a symbolic reminder of conquest. The struggle, then, is profoundly deep. How can a Diné person exist? Once defined as inherently holy through ritual, land, language, and K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), which emphasizes Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty, is now being understood within as demonic. A faith tradition that marks of identity now moved to question not merely theological but existential, reaching into the deepest layers of memory and belonging. For many Diné, to be holy again means to reclaim K'é a relational

[16] Kidwell et al., *A Native American Theology*, 66.

depth that was fractured, even while wrestling with the Christian presence that has become interwoven into culture, family, community, and present history. This unresolved struggle of questioning what it means to be holy as Diné people naturally enfold daily as one struggles with their participation in both Christianity and Diné traditions. The inward imagery of faith often feels divided, knowing that Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) are present in either choice, yet one feeling compelled to defend one's belief in contrast to another and to others in each community of faith.

For many Diné people, this struggle is not abstract but lived in worship, ceremonies, and conversation. A Christian hymn sung on Sunday may stir the same longing for divine presence as the chant of a traditional prayer, yet the two are often cast in opposition to each other and no longer hold a true meaning of K'é (relationship). This creates an inner duel battle, where faith is not only about belief in but about defending the legitimacy of one's chosen path. Within families and communities, such tensions do surface in subtle ways. For example, one may question whether attending a Diné ceremony compromises one's Christian devotion, or whether praying in church diminishes one's Diné identity. The process of faith now holds a Diné experience of Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) in a contested space, where every expression of faith carries the shadow of another tradition pressing against it. This inner duel of faith naturally extends outward into the realm of public worship and ceremonial practice, where the act of gathering before the divine, whether in church or in traditional ceremonies offers not only intervention and guidance, but also a fragile clarity of K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), which once truly emphasizes Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty that would beautifully sustain identity.

For many Diné people, public worship is never merely about ritual performances, it is the space where existence is affirmed, where divine presence is encountered, and where identity is reshaped. In Christian practice, worship may provide the assurance of salvation and community belonging is closely tied to the looming possibility of eschatological judgment and exclusion. In contrast, Diné ceremonies participation restores K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and emphasizes Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. Both forms of worship promise divine intervention and guidance, yet they do so through profoundly different worldviews, one emphasizing redemption through Christ in a dogmatic style, the other emphasizing restoration through K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and emphasizes a continual journey toward Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. The tension between the two reveals not only a struggle over religious allegiance but also a deeper quest for clarity of self in K'é (relationship), to the sacred divine presence.

For Diné candidates, in the process for Christian clergy ordination, they often are caught between the two world views. Where the Diné theological emphasize K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), to sustain a journey toward Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. A theology that does not align with Western models of ordination, doctrine, or theological preparation. Even as some Denominations publicly offered guidance to a sense of belonging, the structure of Christian leadership so often fails to accommodate the holistic and communal (K'é) dimensions of Diné spirituality. As a result, many Diné aspiring candidates face barriers not of personal failures to faith or calling, but to a systemic practice that does not recognize or legitimize their

Diné ways of knowing, worshipping, and leading. Even, within some denominations whose profession of inclusiveness are voiced, many Diné candidates have found themselves navigating a system that subtly demanded conversion to a colonial model of faith while offering little recognition of their cultural and spiritual formation, revealing how procedural ideals of openness often mask systemic racism and oppression.

As most institution's candidacy processes may inclusively welcome all who feel called to ministry. In practice, however, Diné aspirants encounter expectations shaped by centuries of colonial Christian norms for ordination standards, theological language, and pastoral models that assume a Western worldview. Conversion is mildly treated as both a spiritual prerequisite and a marker of cultural conformity, subtly pressuring candidates to abandon or suppress aspects of their Diné identity. The church may speak of inclusiveness, yet the very structure for candidacy reveals an unacknowledged hierarchy supremacy of culture and legitimacy. For Diné candidates, this produces a profound struggle, to honor their calling while resisting the erasure of the relational, harmonic, and sacred dimensions of their Indigenous identity. The result is not merely individual tension but a system that reproduces oppression under the guise of faithfulness and fairness.

The tension faced by Diné candidates and the institution is compounded by the absence of any viable alternative. The structure of the institute has not been adapted to recognize the relational, societal, and sacred aspects of Diné leadership, leaving aspirants caught between their cultural identity and the expectations of Western ecclesial authority. No established pathway exists that credibly affirms Diné forms of spiritual guidance while still meeting denominational standards for clergy. As a result, candidates are forced into compromise, presenting themselves in ways that align with the Church's colonial forms rather than the

fullness of their own calling. This systemic gap not only marginalizes individual leaders in both worlds but also signals to broader Diné community that their spiritual formation and culture are secondary. The systemic pattern entrenches oppression under the guise of inclusiveness and both personal and institutional are challenged of legitimate Diné leadership that is designed for conformity, and not for integration or respect.

One has to consider, the ways that the complex struggle of the historical pressures of colonialism, the imposition of White education, the expectation of conformity within Christian institutions have shaped Diné responses to the approaches of leadership. Fear of failure, caution in pursuing higher education, and the deep internalized expectation of poverty are not signs of inability, rather adaptation to centuries of colonization that devalued Diné and other Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual formation. Understanding this context reveals that what may appear as reluctance or deficit is, really, a complex response rooted in survival, preservation of K'é (relationality), culture, and discernment of how best to lead in a historically traumatic life that has never been honored. Yet, through it all some Diné call themselves Christian and still hold to a theological emphasizing on K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), which still leads them toward Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. To them, it is complete redemption.

Christian Education and its Colonial Legacy

Education is good, son, but don't get lost in it. It's limited, stay in Ho'zho'!

You learn how to be and how not to be.

You learn of yourself, and you learn of your neighbor.

You learn of Creator and learn to speak to Creator.

Everything about life is learning.

Go learn but stay in Hózhóón.

Balance what you learn.

—Helen Tsosie (Diné)[17]

During the era of missionary boarding schools—as it continues into the present time—the curriculum remained deeply rooted in European history and worldview. Within these private missionary institutions, Christian scripture was not merely a subject of study but the moral and ethical foundation by which a Diné student's worth was measured. Obedience to white moral standards and Christian doctrine became synonymous with civilization and correctness. Lessons about original sin, paganism, and legalistic truth reinforced a narrow religious framework that dismissed Diné ways of knowing K'é (relationality). Below these teachings lay a subtle yet powerful message, that what was deemed good, rational (K'é), and knowledgeable belonged to a higher order of culture—one defined by Christianity and Eurocentric superiority and not of K'é (relationality).

The dogmatic nature of Christian doctrine introduced a worldview that sharply contrasted with Diné traditions of K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. These Christian teachings emphasized sin, guilt, and redemption through external authority, where Diné spirituality centered on restoration of K'é (relationality), Ho'zho'

[17] Helen Tsosie (author's deceased grandmother), oral teaching, 1972.

(balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), which created a life journey toward Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. In addition, in Christian theology there was an insistence on a singular truth and the rejection of plural spiritual expressions that produced deep fractures within families and communities. Many Diné children, shaped by Christian education, learned to view their own ceremonies and stories as superstitions or evils in need of conversion. Over generations, this moral dualism eroded confidence in Diné wisdom of K'é (relationality) and replaced K'é (communal) belonging with internalized shame.

The colonial process was not only political but profoundly theological. Scriptures such as Acts 4:12— "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" were interpreted as divine mandates for conversion and conquest. This verse, when read through a Eurocentric lens, became the theological basis of exclusion to salvation, and the requirement of, and insistence on assimilation. Similarly, passages like John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life" and Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" were weaponized as sacred permission to dismantle Diné spiritual practices of K'é (relational) theology. Within this framework, evangelization became indistinguishable from colonization. By sanctifying domination as mission, the church embedded hierarchy within theology itself, ensuring that the colonial order was maintained under the banner of divine truth.

This theological colonization perpetuated generational harm among the Diné people. By framing Diné identity as an obstacle to salvation, and Christianity transformed faith into a system of control. The resulting spiritual dissonance alienated many Diné people from their own sense of sacredness, while those who sought to remain faithful Christians often faced accusations of betraying beyond religion into education, governance, and self-perception, as the

colonial logic of conversion continued to define what counted as “civilized” or “saved.” In this way, theology became both the tool and the testimony of empire, binding the Diné experience within a moral structure that demanded surrender to belong.

This colonial theology that justified conversion also shaped the pedagogy of the classroom. Missionary schools functioned as instruments of spiritual and intellectual control, teaching students to memorize and recite moral lessons drawn from Scripture and European history. The knowledge was transmitted hierarchically, from teacher to student, from preacher to listener, mirroring the colonial relationship between ruler and subject. The imposed pedagogy valued written text over oral tradition, individual achievement over communal wisdom, and obedience over inquiry. Learning became an act of compliance rather than discovery or lived experience. Through rigid discipline, English only policies, and Christian moral instruction, the school sought to reorder how the Diné children and families would understand knowledge, to know was to accept, not to question.

This approach directly clashed with the Diné learning systems that had long sustained Diné life. Traditional Diné education was holistic, relational (K’é), and experiential, rooted in storytelling, observation, and the rhythm of the earth. Elders taught not through lectures but through participation, modeling balance, and respect in daily life. Learning was a lifelong process of becoming, guided by the principles of K’é (relationality), Ho’zho’ (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and Sa’ah Naagha’ii Bik’eh Ho’zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. When missionary pedagogy dismissed these methods as primitive or inferior, it fractured the continuity of cultural knowledge. The imposed schooling severed Diné children from their learning environment of language, land, and K’é (relationality). Learning was replaced with a foreign system that prized abstraction over K’é

(relationality). The result was not simply the loss of language or tradition, but a deep rupture in the Diné way of knowing, a disruption that continues to shape attitudes towards education and faith today.

This structure of Christian education, then, marginalized the Diné worldview by defining truth and morality exclusively through White European theological and intellectual framework. Within the missionary and later denominational schools, (even private schools), knowledge was organized around Chirstian dogma and European epistemology, leaving little space for Diné cosmology or relational ethics of K'é. The Diné understanding of the world as sacred, interdependent, and continually renewed through K'é (relationality), was recast as superstition or myth. In its place, Diné children were taught that divine truth existed outside of themselves, accessible only through biblical authority and clerical interpretation. This reorientation of learning displaced the Diné concept of K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty which sees wisdom as something lived, balanced, and shared rather than something possessed or controlled.

In the Christian education, the hierarchy between teacher and student mirrored the colonial hierarchy between colonizer and colonized. Christian educators assumed the position of spiritual and intellectual authority, while Diné children were expected to abandon their inherited knowledge systems to gain acceptance within a "civilized" Chistian faith. Ceremonial songs, prayers, and stories that once centralized a moral formation, were forbidden or trivialized, pushing Diné spirituality to the margins of legitimacy. Even as schools claimed to teach universal truths, they did so by negating the truths of Diné existence. The message is clear, to learn is to forget; and to be Christian is to unlearn being Diné.

This marginalization did more than suppress the Diné practices, it redefined what counted as knowledge and whose voice carried authority. Over time, generations of Diné educated under Christian systems learned to internalize the inferiority of their own worldview, often equating faithfulness with cultural erasure. The church's curriculum, steeped in Eurocentric theology, thus became a vehicle of epistemic violence, silencing Diné wisdom under the guise of moral and spiritual uplift. The consequence is a lingering tension within many Diné Christian communities today. A struggle to reconcile faith in Christ with fidelity to ancestral teachings that affirm the sacredness of creation, K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty.

The Christian institutions succeeded in disciplining the spirit as much as the wholeness of culture. The colonial project was thus sustained through theology, embedding domination within the language of moral improvement. Even today, echoes of that legacy persist when Diné must navigate between the Church's claims of truth and the ancestral teachings that root them in K'é (relationality), Ho'zho' (balance, harmony, peace, and beauty), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. The damage is not only cultural but spiritual, manifesting as generational disconnection, mistrust of education, and the lingering belief that to be fully Christian requires one to be less Diné.

Yet across generations, Diné people have been compelled by K'é (kin) to enter, endure, and navigate these processes of institutional formation. This was not simply accommodation, but a painful and purposeful engagement with structures that sought to define, educate, and assimilate. Why does this matter now? Because in this present moment, White America and its churches stand in a profound need of what Diné tradition has long carried; K'é (relationality) as

a theology of rightful relationship with all living formation, Ho'zho' as a disciplined way of living in harmony, and to gain Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon as a vision of life ordered towards wholeness. These are not abstract ideals, but lived commitments forged through stories, ceremonies, living with the earth, and a relationality that fully restores life. And if Diné communities are to hear of their K'é theology, they must be spoken in forms they recognize. It must be articulated within theological language, academic structures, and ecclesial imagination, so that what has been sustained in Diné life may confront, heal, and restore the worlds that once refused to see or understand it.

CHAPTER 4: DINÉ SPIRITUALITY AS A HERMENEUTIC TOOL

Níłch'i (Holy Wind) has always been here, it was here before anything
was created. Its exists with Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani during creation.
Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani Blow Níłch'i over creation and life came.
Níłch'i is in all creation, it's has been in us before we were born.
When it was blown, it gave life to all things.
—Thomas Tsosie Sr. (Diné)

To read Scripture through Diné lens is to return theology to its tribal and relational (K'é) roots. Before it became entangled with imperial systems, the Bible was itself a tribal narrative, a living collection of oral stories shaped by covenant, land, kinship (K'é), and survival of a people. The Israelites, much like the Diné, understood creation not as an abstract event but as an emergence into a network of K'é (relationships) among people, their ceremonies, sacredness, and land. Yet, within the colonial formation of Christian education, this shared tribal consciousness was not only stripped from Diné spirituality but also from the Scriptures themselves. The Israelite practices were regarded as primitive, the Torah as reduced to an "Old Testament," and K'é (relational) ways of knowing were displaced by imperial rationalism and governmental ideologies. In the process, sacred stories were transformed into instruments of control rather than pathways of K'é (relationality), a communion with God, people, and creation.

In response to this colonial rupture, reclaiming a tribe-to-tribe K'é (relationality) between Diné and Israelite traditions becomes a pathway toward restored K'é (relationality), a communion with Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God), community, and creation. At the center of

the hermeneutic lens of K'é (relationality) stands, not merely kinship or evangelistic hospitality, but a relational (K'é) epistemology through which spiritual (Níłch'i) knowledge itself is formed. With K'é (relationality), meanings arise communally rather than abstractly, there theology is not constructed in isolation but emerges through lived relationship (K'é) through ceremonial life (church attendance), with the earth, and responsibility. When Scripture is read through K'é (relationality) and empowered by Níłch'i (Holy Wind) as the living presence that moves between people, creation, and sacredness, then there Diné spirituality functions not as a supplement to Christian theology but as a hermeneutic lens of liberation. This tribe-to-tribe reading resists the imperial tendencies of Christian education that have prioritized abstraction, hierarchy, and individualism. This theological lens can re-center spirituality and in K'é (relationality) realities of decolonization are possible.

As a tribal hermeneutic, then, through K'é (relationality) readers will read Scripture in an innovative approach and see relationship (K'é) perceived as sacred. Because within K'é pedagogy, relationality take precedence over hierarchy, breath over conquest, and gives Ho'zho (harmony) over possession. For example, through K'é (relationality), Genesis no longer functions as a distant account of origins but as a living narrative of relationships, one that speaks of Níłch'i (Holy Wind) moving through creation, where Ho'zho (harmony) structures life, and a world formed for Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. In such a lens, creation is not presented as an object to be mastered but a living network of relationships which life emerges. In addition, Genesis becomes a tribal story that names humanity, the earth, and Creator God as bound together through K'é (relationality), inviting Diné people and other Indigenous readers into relational belonging rather than abstract belief.

This relational (K'é) reading, then, reframes Scripture as an ongoing creation narrative, one in which Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) continues to communicate through the earth, life, and breath of Níłch'i (Holy Wind). Such an approach decolonizes biblical interpretation by returning Scripture to its communal and sacred roots and by restoring interpretive authority to Diné people, Indigenous tribes, and other marginalized voices. Here within a K'é (relationality) centered theology, creation becomes a mode of divine revelation, where Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) presence is disclosed not only through written words but through relationships sustained among people, places, and all living beings. Sacred knowledge, then, is not confined to Scripture alone but is encountered in the rhythms of the earth, the movements of the heavens, and the interdependence of life. For this theological perspective, Gensis 1-2 becomes more than a Westernized Christian educational story of beginnings, it becomes a sacred dialogue that resonates with Diné spiritual understanding of creation, relationships, and the relational order of the universe.

Additionally, when reading Genesis through K'é (relationality), the opening creation narrative speaks to the language of relationships. For example, in chapter 1, creation does not emerge as a collection of isolated objects but as a carefully ordered unfolding of life shaped by the Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) relational presence. The movement of the text, from chaos from darkness to light, to the formation of living communities, reveals a sacred sequencing that mirrors Diné understanding of K'é (relationality) with Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind). Life comes forth in their relational order, they first create vegetation (1:11), then the winged and swimming beings (1:20), then the four-legged ones (1:24), and finally the two-legged (1:26). This rhythm discloses a world formed through connection rather than conquest, where every form of life

arises within an already established web of K'é (relationship). In this theological lens, Genesis becomes a narrative of K'é (relationality), naming a sacred structure of relationship in which all beings are brought into mutual dependence of Ho'zho' (harmony), and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of peace, balance, and beauty forms.

As creation is surrounded by K'é, in the relational order, humanity's late arrival is theologically significant. Humans are created not to inaugurate life, but to enter a world already alive with relatives. Before humanity takes breath, the earth is already full of elders, teachers, and family members in the plants, the winged ones, the swimmers, and the four-legged walkers. Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) designed K'é (relational) order is established prior to human presence, indicating that the world is not made to revolve around humanity but to receive humanity. Thus, presents human beings not as rulers place above creation, but as honored relatives welcomed into an existing community of life (K'é). Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) gives humanity a family before giving humanity a task. Such a vision forms a theology of beloving rather than possession, where existence itself is a gift of K'é (relationship). From this theological lens, humans are not above creation, they are respectfully placed within it.

K'é teaches that all beings share origin and purpose through Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God), and that identity arises from relationship rather than ownership. Reading through K'é, then, creation is not a closed event but an ongoing expression of divine relationality (K'é), a continual renewal of K'é and Ho'zho' (harmony) among relatives. Humanity's vocation, therefore, is not domination but participation, to live honorable and respectfully within the circle of relationships that sustain life. Such a reorientation transforms Genesis from a narrative of power into a narrative of belonging, where knowing Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) is

inseparable from honoring the Creator's family. This way of listening to Scripture is not only reclaims the sacred harmony of creation but also restores the human spirit to its intended place within Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) relational order.

From this Diné hermeneutical view, K'é (relationality) is not only a human or communal ethic. It is a revelation within the very being of Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God). Where in Genesis, the gesture toward this sacred relationality is when Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) declares, "Let us make humankind in our image" (Gen. 1:26). This plural divine claim discloses a Creator God who exists not in isolation but in communion. The "image of Creator God," then is not primarily power or authority, but participation in a K'é (relational) life already shared within Creator God. It gives knowledge that humanity is formed from the earth as an expression of that divine K'é (relational) presence and function on earth as it does in the heavens. Diné people understand that humanity is born into a circle of belonging and creation reflects Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) own shared existence. To be made in the image of Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God), then, is to be created for and from K'é (relationship), to live respectfully and honorably within the sacred family of Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) creation.

Additionally, Genesis 2 deepens this image by locating humanity's identity within both divine and earthly relationship (K'é). Formed from the earth and animated by Níłch'i (Holy Wind), the human emerges as the meeting place of heaven and earth, embodying the divine breath within created life. Humanity is not introduced as autonomous ruler, but as K'é (relational) being placed within an already living communities. The charge to "till and keep the garden" (Gen. 2:15) is therefore not a mandate of domination but a K'é (relational) responsibility. It names a vocation of care, attentiveness, and kinship. More so, a calling to

participate in the same relational order through which Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) brought the world into being. In such a theological view, humanity then is entrusted not with control, but with the continuation of K'é (relationality).

When these relationships (K'é) are distorted, the rupture is not only ecological or social but spiritual, for it disrupts the reflection of Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) own relational (K'é) being within creation. When disruption to K'é happens, all creation is affected and a longing of restoration is desired. As understood, Scripture also bears witness to a persistent longing for restored harmony (Ho'zho). As Paul writes, "creation waits with eager longing" (Rom. 8:19), echoing a Diné hermeneutic intuition that the earth, humanity, and Creator God remain oriented toward renewed K'é (relationality). Therefore, from a K'é-centered reading, this longing is not an escape from Christian education but a call back into right relation. Genesis 1-2 thus becomes not only a story of beginnings, but a narrative of vocation and returning to K'é (relationship). A summons to live once more within the sacred rhythm of K'é (relationality) and Ho'zho (harmony), where divine relationship is mirrored in every living connection so that Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of peace, balance, and beauty becomes.

To approach Christ through K'é (relationality) is to witness divine relationship taken from within creation. In the life of Christ, the relational (K'é) being of Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) becomes visible, not as abstraction, but as live communion. Jesus' baptism, the relationship (K'é) can be heard as a moment of sacred introduction, a public location of identity within divine kinship. As the heavens open, the Spirit (Níłch'i) descends, and the voice declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved" (Luke 3:22). Christ is not just affirmed but he is relationally placed. Like a Diné clan summary, their introduction

that names one's family and emergence, gives this baptismal moment of Jesus clan within the sacred family of Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind). Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) names Christ and Níłch'i (Holy Wind) rests upon him, to where Christ stands within their communion. Reading through K'é (relationality), this theology becomes a declaration of belonging before it is a declaration of mission. Christ is identified within divine K'é (relationality) and entrusted, from within that sacred kinship, with the work of restoring broken relationships and renewing Ho'zho (harmony), so that Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of peace, balance, and beauty could fully be embraced.

From this lens, Christ's mission resonates with the calling of a Holy Man. A Holy Man does not claim authority, rather he is chosen into a mission of restoration of relationships (K'é). Its a purified and entrusted theological task. He learns that the vessel must be emptied so that Níłch'i (Holy Wind) may move freely. The clearer the vessel, the clearer the breath of Níłch'i (Holy Wind) can pass through it. In this old pedagogy, Christ embodies the fulness of this sacred calling. As Philippians declares, he "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:6-8), becoming not just a bearer of sacred presence but the living conduit of it. Through this self-giving, Christ becomes the place where divine breath, Níłch'i (Holy Wind), moves again within creation, making healing, reconciliation, and restoration of K'é (relationality) possible.

With this christological image, salvation is not colonized but the renewal of K'é (relationality). Diné people will see Christ enters a fractured creation to restore communion with humanity, the earth, Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) and Níłch'i (Holy Wind). Then, through Christ's life, of self-emptying and faithfulness, humanity is invited back into the sacred rhythms of K'é (relationality) and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of peace, balance, and beauty can fully be embraced. In this theology of K'é (relationality), Christ does not stand

above the family of creation, he enters it, bears its wounds, and reopens the way of belonging. In him, divine relationships become embodied, and the long-disrupted circle of K'é (relationality) begins to heal. As Genesis reveals K'é (relationality), so the baptism of Christ reveals K'é (relationality), embodied completely in this Diné pedagogy.

Then, when Diné spirituality is received as an inspirational hermeneutic lens, the Genesis creation narrative becomes more than a text of beginnings, it becomes a living story of K'é (relationality). Even if read tribally, Genesis emerges from a people seeking identity not in empire but in covenant relationship (K'é), locating holiness within the earth, breath, kinship, and communal responsibility. In either view, Diné readers will recognize a deep resonance with their own emerging traditions. Their journeys are shaped by movements, ruptures, restoration, and the continual return to rightful relationships (K'é). Their old pedagogy traditions resist abstraction. This theology invite participation rather than detachment, calling readers to encounter creation not as doctrine but as a sacred web of relationships (K'é).

From this lived pedagogy experience, the Diné emergence narrative do not stand in opposition to Genesis but alongside it. The movements through both worldviews toward life gives order, harmony, and renewal. The narratives echoes the rhythms of divine breath as movements within creation from chaos into relational belonging. Therefore, viewed through K'é (relationality), Genesis becomes not just a story of commands or subjugation, but of K'é (relationship) in creation. Creation, then, is revealed as a living community sustained through K'é (relationality), in which humanity is called to participate rather than to rule.

Both Diné tradition and Scripture testify that K'é (relationality) can be disrupted. When K'é (relationality) is fractured, harmony is diminished and life falls out of the sacred rhythm. Within Diné traditional spiritual formation, such rapture calls not for abstraction but for

restoration that is communal, embodied, and ceremonial where a person and communities collective return to the path of beauty. Ceremonies such as *Ye'ii Bi Cheii* function not just as healing ritual but as lived theologies of reconciliation, drawing people back into right relationship with the Diyin Diné (Holy People), community, and the created world. It is to this ceremonial dimension of K'é (relationality) where theology becomes practiced restoration.

Son, you respect all religions.

For you don't know where or when Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) works.

You watch, when you see Níłch'i (Holy Wind) move, you listen and learn.

—Helen Tsosie (Diné)

If Genesis reveals K'é (relationality) in creation and Christ embodies K'é in the new creation through his ceremonial baptism, then understand how Diné ceremony reveals K'é and restores it. In Diné spirituality, when relationships are disrupted—through illness, loss, conflict, or spiritual imbalance—harmony is not repaired through abstraction but through participation. Ceremony becomes the space where fractured relationships are gathered, addressed, and reordered. It is in ceremonies that theology is not only spoken but enacted, and K'é is not only remembered but reentered.

As an example, the Ye'ii Bi Cheii ceremony emerges precisely within this restorative horizon. Performed during the winter season, in the long nights, and shortened days, the ceremony takes place within a symbolic surroundings of disorientation, a time when life itself

feels closest to imbalance. In the darkened setting of ceremonial nights, songs, prayers, movement, and community participation guide the people toward light, order, and renewed harmony. Restoration unfolds not through spectacle but through relational motion, drawing individuals and community back into the sacred rhythms of the narration of K'é (relationality).

At the center of this ceremonial movement stands the Head Dancer, understood as the peacemaker, who mediates between the Diyin Diné (Holy People) and the Diné people. Moving to the rhythm with the chants and sacred rattlers, the Head Dancer does not perform for the Diné people but moves on their behalf, leading the ceremonial towards reconciliation and restoration of K'é (relationality). In his role, the Head Dancer embodies the work of restoration, guiding fractured relationships back toward wholeness, carrying the hopes of the community, and enacting the possibility of renewed harmony. Through this sacred leadership, K'é (relationality) is not only taught but made visible.

The Ye'ii Bi Cheii ceremony thus functions as a living hermeneutic of K'é (relationality). It interprets sickness, imbalance, and disorders not as private failures but as relational disruptions requiring communal healing. Through collective participation, the ceremony restores people to their families, families to the community, and the community to the wider circle of life. K'é (relationship) is renewed not as an idea but as an experienced reality. The Ye'ii Bi Cheii ceremony, then, stands as a ceremonial theology of restoration, revealing how Diné spirituality moves from fracture relationality toward Ho'zho (harmony) and how sacred relationship is continually rewoven into the fabric of life.

CHAPTER 5: TOWARD A DECOLONIZED NATIVE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

For the Diné people, education has never been the accumulation of religious information or institutional formation. It has always been a sacred process of becoming, formed through K'é (relationality), a rightful relationship with Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God), with the earth, with community, and with Diyin Diné (Holy People). Colonial mission education disrupted this sacred pattern. Through policies that outlawed ceremonies, dismissed Diné pedagogy and other Indigenous theology as pagan, only to relocated spirituality into Western church structures, where Diné Christians were taught to encounter Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) primarily through foreign categories. Faith became something practiced inside institutions rather than a life within sacred relationships (K'é). The result was a missionized formation that has separated Diné believers from their own stories, ceremonies, language, families, and relational ways of knowing Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God).

This section proposes K'é (relationality) as a practical hermeneutic and pedagogical lens for the decolonization of Native Christian education, particularly for those entering the candidacy for ordination. Rather than forming candidates primarily through doctrinal compliance and institutional assimilation, a K'é (relational) centered approach reorients theological education around relational theology. It begins from the conviction that relationship (K'é) is not peripheral to faith but its very core. Scripture testifies that Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) desires relationship (K'é) with self, with humanity, even as Christ forms disciples through communion, not abstraction, and the Church exists as a body not an organization (1Cor. 12). K'é (relationality) names this same sacred reality from within Diné theology as life, knowledge, and holiness emerge only within this network, it produces accountability and responsibility.

Through K'é (relationality) theology, decolonized formation becomes not just preparation for ministry, but participation in restored sacred relationships (K'é). Education is, then, re-centered as a ceremonial process of learning to live in rightful relation with Christ, the community of faith, with creation, and with one's own Diné identity. In this lived theological process, K'é (relationality) does not replace Christian theology, it reveals it by developing relational hearts. It offers a route, where Diné leaders and other Indigenous candidates can enter ordained ministry without fragmenting their identity, and by which the Church herself may be re-educated into a more faithful, embodied, and communal expression of the gospel.

Implementing K'é (relationality), as a theological process within Native Christian education requires more than cultural inclusion or symbolic acknowledgements. It demands a restructuring of how candidates are formed, in how knowledge is authorized, and how faith is embodied. Under a K'é (relationality) hermeneutic lens, theological education no longer begins with institutional expectations but with restored relationships with Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God), community, the earth, and one's own Diné identity. Formation is not something done to the candidate, but something entered into with them as a relationship (K'é).

In the provisional course, the K'é (relationality) centered theology will address the deep fractures produced by colonial mission models, which trained Native Christians to separate theology from the earth, spirituality from culture, and ministry from community. Also, in contrast to the old missionary education, K'é (relationality) reorients formation around accountability to relationships. Demonstrating that learning emerges through participation, mutual care, storytelling, prayer, and lived responsibility. Knowledge, then, is not just transferred, it is carried within K'é (relationality). Authority is not centralized in credentialed

specialist alone, but shared with elders, cultural knowledge keepers, pastors, and community mentors who together shape the candidates' discernment, character, and calling.

With this model, culturally grounded practices are not supplemental to theological education, they are formative. Communal prayer, land-based meditations, intergenerational dialogue, songs, language, and relational mentorship becomes legitimate theological processes. These practices cultivate ministers who are not only biblically informed, but spiritually rooted in their culture, communally accountable, and ceremonially awaken. Candidates are formed to understand ministry is not primarily as professional function, but as relational responsibility.

What makes this hermeneutic lens powerful, for Diné and other Indigenous candidates is that it refuses the colonial demands to fragment the self in order to follow Christ. K'é (relationality) affirms that Diné way of knowing, relating, and discernments are not obstacles to Christian discipleship, but vessels through which Creator God has always been encountered. It allows candidates to locate their own call to ministry within their own cultural and sacred histories of K'é (relationality), and communal obligations. This formation becomes an act of healing as well as preparation.

Such a model moves Native Christian education away from a mission imposed by external structures and towards a movement arising from within Diné communities themselves. It calls institutions like the United Methodist Church not just to recruit Native candidates, but to repent of systemic and theological habits that have excluded Diné and other Indigenous epistemologies, and to redistribute trust, voice, and formative authority. In a K'é (relationality) based process, it becomes both a path of discipleship and a concrete expression of decolonization where one that forms ministers capable of serving the Church without surrendering the integrity of their own Indigenous identity.

Though the work of decolonization cannot rest upon Indigenous communities alone. If Christian education is to be transformed, the Church herself must enter a process of re-education. At this current moment, the United Methodist Church is actively rearticulating her identity, this research on K'é (relationality) functions not only as a model for Native Christian formation, but as a practical Christian pedagogy capable of confronting Methodism's colonial habits and reshape how the Church forms her leaders, understanding their vocation, and imagines her future. The concluding chapter, therefore, explores how a K'é (relationality) centered practical theology can serve as one of the Church's first steps towards instituting a decolonized, relational, and sustainable Christian education. This K'é (relationality) education seeks not just to train candidates, but to re-form the Church herself.

CHAPTER 6: K'É (RELATIONALITY) AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

Currently the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church has invited the denominational members to a season of discernment under the theme, "Emboldened by the Spirit: Imagining a Church Yet to Be."[18] This initiative acknowledges what many members already feel that the inherited ecclesial forms are no longer sustaining their Christian life, it's credibility, and witness. Though, much of their conversation remains shaped by Western White ecclesial imagination. Their questions of relevance, effectiveness, and institutional identity dominate, while deeper interrogations of colonial theology, land alienation, and distorted authority remain largely absent.

It is in this invitation that the Diné K'é (relationality) theology does not just contribute to the discernment but confronts it. K'é (relationality) does not offer Methodism another ministry strategy, it offers a different theological ground. When placed in conversation with the Church's future discernment, K'é (relationality) suggests that Methodism's crisis is not primarily organization, but relational, cosmological, and spiritual. The Church is not simply declining; she is suffering from disordered relationships (K'é). Not just with Diné people and other Indigenous Nations but with land, with divine authority, and with her own understanding of communal formation. Because these disorders are learned, they are also taught. The future of the Church is therefore inseparable from the future of her Christian education.

When Diné K'é (relationality) pedagogy becomes practical Christian education, it names more than kinship. It is a moral, spiritual, and ontological network that orders existence through

[18] Council of Bishops, "United Methodists Invited to Participate in Leadership Gathering Initiative via Survey, Webinars," Council of Bishops, The United Methodist Church, January 20, 2026, https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/leadership-gathering-initiative-via-survey-webinars-19581770.

relationships, obligations, and accountability. A person does not first exist and then enters community, one is born into a web of relations that includes family, clan, the earth, with Diyin Diné (Holy People), and future generations. The declining is failure to keep Ho'zho (harmony, balance, peace, and beauty) in their relationships (K'é). Understand, Ho'zho is not a feeling, but a condition continually formed, where brokenness and restoration through communal practice is a divine responsibility.

When brought into White Christian education or their institutions, K'é (relationality) disrupts their Western ideology. Because formation is no longer the transmission of religious knowledge to individuals, but the shaping of K'é (relational) life. Authority is not primarily conferred by institutions but recognized through accountability and responsibility to relationships. Theology, then is not spoken, but engaged through stories, ceremonies, and relationship to places.

From K'é (relationality) lens, the Church's emphasis on professionalized leadership, credentialed expertise, and abstracted theology reveals not neutrality, but colonial formation. This formation holds an imperialistic habit that sustains her death. The problem, then, is not just what the Church teaches, but what it has been teaching candidates to become. If the Church is to imagine a different future, she must enter a different educational process, one capable of re-forming relationships (K'é), not just retraining leadership.

K'é (relationality) forms decolonization, it goes beyond pronouncements of inclusion. As many Methodist outreach approaches to Diné and other Indigenous engagements have often emphasized representation, culture awareness, and contextual ministry. While important, these approaches leave the Church's theological imperialist development center largely intact because they keep reverting back to their colonial heritage. But K'é (relationality) does not seek space

within that realm. It questions whether that realm has been formed through disordered relationships to humanity, the earth, sacredness of ceremony, and divine power.

Therefore, a decolonized Christian education cannot be achieved by adding Diné K'é (relationality) or other Indigenous content to existing institutional structures. It requires retracing how the Church has learned to understand authority, salvation, healing, and even knowing of Ya'alnii'Nee'Ya'ani (Creator God) presence. Diné K'é (relationality) theology will reintroduces dimensions largely absent from Methodism because it gives the earth as a living relative, of her theological witness, a real existence of Holy People, sacred ceremonies as pedagogy, elders as bearers of doctrine, and Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of peace, balance, and beauty as the horizon of salvation. In this theology, decolonization is not programmatic adjustments, but an educational conversion within community (K'é). Without such conversion, imagining the Methodist's future risks becoming rhetorical rather than transformative.

Importantly, Diné K'é (relationality) theology has challenges when it encounters intuitional vocational ministry seen with calling. It is known in Methodist tradition, that vocation is framed as an individual divine calling and is institutionally discerned, authorized, and protected. Where ordination is not just commissions, it reclassifies an individual's calling when one become clergy. Spiritual authority, theological voice, and sacramental legitimacy are concentrated within the office of clergy.

K'é (relationality) theology destabilizes this vocational network at its roots. In K'é (relationality) theology, no one is a minister first. One is a relative first. Calling does not originate in the individual, but in communal recognition. Authority does not rest in position, but in sustained relational integrity and responsibility to it. Wisdom is not granted through

credentials, but demonstrated through life oriented toward Ho'zho—harmony, balance, peace, and beauty.

What is threatened in K'é (relationality) is not just structure, but identity. When authority no longer flows from ordination and ministers are asked to relinquish forms of significance that have long defined vocation itself. There clergy-laity divide becomes theologically incoherent. Then healing, discernment, and teachings return to the community as a shared practice rather than controlled functions. From K'é (relationality) theology, this disturbance is not destruction. It is the necessary condition for healing. The disharmony of K'é (relationality) must be revealed before it can be restored.

However, K'é (relationality) does not abolish leadership. It reconstitutes it, where leadership emerges not as spiritual responsibility but as relational (K'é) keepers. Where authority is situational, accountable, and always subject to communal participation. A leader's legitimacy is sustained not by office but by the quality of relationships they protect and restore.

K'é (relationality), then frames Christian education not as preparation for ministry as a profession but a lifelong formation into communal trust. Calling becomes entrusted ceremonial participation rather than religious specialists. In this theology, ministry does not disappear, but it ceases to function as a professional class and begins to emerge as a relational practice shaped by Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) to preserve Ho'zho—harmony, balance, peace, and beauty throughout all creation.

When, K'é (relationality), is placed in conversation with the current Methodist discernment, it does not offer strategic proposals. It offers a theological diagnosis. The Church's

uncertainty may be read as institutional decline. But really, the consequences of decline come from a long-standing of K'é (relationality) disorder.

The future of Methodism shaped by K'é (relationality), would not define faithfulness by expansion or innovation, but by restored relationships with their own broken people, with all Indigenous people, and the earth. In K'é theology, the Holy People, Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) will show the Church her own broken life, with a path toward restoration. She would recognize, then, the Diné and other Indigenous theologies are not contextual supplements, but as sources of ecclesial wisdom capable of reshaping Christian education itself.

Though, such a future will feel threatening. K'é theology will require loss, it will demand repentance that is not only verbal, but structural, territorial, and pedagogical. Though, the Diné K'é (relationality) theology, this is not an ending. It is restoration, as Diné people call Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of peace, balance, harmony, and beauty. Or, in additional translation—where Logos helps us reach the fullness of life and our traveling on earth is based upon the old pedagogy that brings complete harmony.

CHAPTER 7: K'É AS THEOLOGICAL DISRUPTION AND ECCLESIAL FUTURE

Integrating a decolonized Diné pedagogy within the United Methodist Church presents not only institutional challenges, but a deeper theological confrontation. K'é (relationality) is not simply a cultural supplement to Western theological education, it is a relational ontology that exposes the colonial foundation embedded within Christian institutions. By centering K'é (relationship) over hierarchy, the earth over abstraction, story over system, and communal accountability over individual credentialing, K'é directly challenges colonial patterns of authority, knowledge, and spiritual formation that continues to shape United Methodist structures.

One major challenge is that the denomination remains deeply formed by a predominantly White Western theological imagination that privileges written text over oral wisdom, institutional systems over lived relationships (K'é), and doctrinal mastery over embodied experiences. These systemic habits, often assumed to be neutral, but function as colonial technologies of control. From K'é (relationality) centered theology, such formations fracture the sacred web of relationship (K'é) between people, the earth, the Diyin Diné (Holy People), Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). K'é (relationality) therefore does not just ask to be included within these structures, it calls them into deconstruction, repentance, and re-ordering.

This challenge is particularly evident in processes of candidacy and ordination. Psychological evaluations, academic competencies, and doctrinal examinations are largely shaped by Euro-American assumptions about personhood, vocation, and spiritual maturity. They leave little space for Diné communal (K'é) discernment, clan accountability, ceremonial

knowledge, elder guidance, and earth-based spiritual formation. As a result, Diné candidates are compelled to translate their calling into foreign theological categories that dilute cultural integrity and misrecognize Indigenous forms of wisdom. What is frequently interpreted as deficiency may in fact be a different and deeply theological way of knowing, leading, and being formed into Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) image.

K'é (relationality) also confronts the itinerant system itself. As the United Methodist itinerancy presumes mobility, individual availability, and separation from extended K'é (kinship) structures. The Diné people, whose identity, responsibility, and spiritual grounding are inseparable from the earth, clan, and community, the itinerant system often produces not freedom but fragmentation. The K'é (relationality) centered theology exposes this as an ecclesiology shaped more by colonial expansion than by relational (K'é) faithfulness. A decolonized approach must therefore wrestle with how authority, appointments, and mission might be reimagined through Indigenous commitments to sacred place, K'é (kinship), and sacred responsibility.

It is precisely in that sigma above that K'é (relationality) offers transformative opportunities. K'é (relationality) provides the United Methodist Church not only with a method of inclusion, but with a decolonized ecclesial vision. It reframes the denomination's mission from making disciples, understood primarily as individual conversion and institutional reproduction, toward the cultivation of a community of relatives (K'é). In this vision, discipleship is not primarily about producing church members, but about restoring rightful relationships (K'é) between peoples, with the earth, Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

Through K'é (relationality), Wesleyanism emphases on grace, holiness, and connection are not discarded, but deconstructed and re-grounded. Grace is no longer abstract favor, but relational (K'é) responsibility. Holiness is not moral performance, but restored Ho'zhoon (harmonizing) relationship with Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). Connectionalism is not institutional reach but lived K'é (kinship) with all creation. In this way, K'é (relationality) does not abandon the Wesleyan heritage, it exposes its colonial captivity and opens it towards a future it has not yet fully embodied.

Within a K'é (relationality) centered pedagogy, theological education becomes a practice of relational repair. Culture, language, ceremony, and natural revelation are reclaimed as theological sources. Formation becomes communal (K'é). Authority become accountable and responsible to relationships. Such a space makes possible acts of truth-telling, repentance, and reconciliation between Diné and non-Diné Christians, between institutions and the communities they have harmed. Here, education itself becomes a form of restorative justice, reweaving K'é (relationality) where it has been broken.

Ultimately, this study argues that Diné theology offers the United Methodist, Christian education, and other institutions a decolonized path forward. Not as a program, not a diversity initiative, but a theological reorientation toward Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) natural order of K'é (relationality) with all creation. In K'é (relationality), the Church is invited to move beyond colonial discipleship into a lived pursuit of Sa'ah Naagha'ii Bik'eh Ho'zhoon—a completeness of harmony, peace, balance, and beauty. A place of sacred belonging.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, or of a prayer or ceremony,

You always say *Hózhǫ́ Náhásdlíį*.

It means, "It has become beautiful again,

Life has become beautiful."

You say it four times:

"Life has become beautiful again, balanced,

harmonized, and a blessed way again."

—Thomas Tsosie Sr. (Diné)

The practical implication of this theological project is an affirmation of the Diné expression of Hózhǫ́ Náhásdlíį—it has become beautiful again. This work has articulated a Diné Christian hermeneutic grounded in K'é, understood as relationship, kinship, and moral responsibility as a living theological lens through which Scripture, discipleship, and Christian formation may be faithfully engaged. Rather than treating Indigenous knowledge as supplemental or illustrative, this project asserts that Diné relational epistemology offers a vital theological syntax for understanding humanity, redemption, Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God).

This K'é (relationality) theology bears witness to the longing of Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) for restored relationship (K'é) with all humanity. It names faith not as abstraction, doctrine, or individual assent but as lived relational presence

between creation, people, Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God). K'é (relationality) resonates deeply within the heart of the Gospel, it shows Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) are moving towards humanity not to dominate or erase, but to restore communion, dignity, and belonging. The Gospel, when encountered through K'é (relationality), is not a foreign imposition but a relational invitation to the Diné people that honors language, the earth, and community as sacred spaces of revelation.

This theological lens directly confronts the historical violence of colonization and missionary education systems that sought to sever Diné identity through the logic of "kill the Indian and save the man." Such logic fractured relationship with culture, within self, and with Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) by equating Christian faith with cultural erasure and whiteness. K'é (relationality) theology exposes this distortion by refusing to separate faith from peoplehood. It reclaims Christian formation as restorative rather than assimilative, healing rather than disciplinary, and communal rather than individualistic. It offers a path toward theological repair where Diné people may engage Christianity without fear, shame, or anxiety, and without being required to abandon who they are in order to belong.

By centering K'é (relationality), presence, and shared experience, this work challenges dominant White American pedagogies that prioritize abstraction, hierarchy, and imperial logic. It proposes instead a theological education shaped by lived context, relational accountability, and cultural pedagogy. Such an approach does not reject Christian tradition but reorients it, demonstrating that the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be reduced to a White Man's religion or a colonial project. Rather, it is the Gospel of Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) restoring relationship with humanity in Christ. A Gospel that can be genuinely received, embodied, and proclaimed within a Diné worldview as one's own.

The future of the Church, particularly within Indigenous contexts, depends upon this kind of theological reorientation. K'é (relationality), theology does not seek syncretism nor a return to missionary antagonism. Instead, it reclaims Indigenous inheritance. It offers the Church a way forward in which faith is formed through relationships (K'é), discipleship is practiced through kinship (K'é), and theology is accountable to the lives of the people it claims to serve. In this vision, the Church becomes a place of restored belonging rather than imposed conformity, and the Gospel becomes good news again.

Ultimately, this study affirms K'é (relationality), as both hermeneutic and hope. It offers a theological imagination where Diné people may encounter Níłch'i (Holy Wind) and Yá alnii'Nee'Yáani (Creator God) authentically, where faith nurtures communal healing and solidarity. Where Christian education participates in liberation rather than domination. This lens does not only serve Diné people, but it also invites the wider Church to rediscover the Gospel as a relational act of restoration, one that calls all people into a shared, embodied, and beautiful belonging.

Bibliography

Diné College. “The Educational Philosophy of Diné College: Sa’ah Naagháíí Bik’eh Hózhóón.” Accessed May 24, 2025, https://www.dinecollege.edu/about-us/educational-philosophy.

Kidwell, Clara Sue, Homer Noley, and George E. “Tink” Tinker. *A Native American Theology*. Orbis Books, 2001.

New Mexico Historic Sites. “Bosque Redondo Memorial at Fort Sumner Historic Site.” First accessed July 2025..

Pratt, R. H. “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites.” In *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction at the Nineteenth Annual Session Held in Denver, Col., June 23-29, 1892*, edited by Isabel C. Barrows. Boston, 1892..

Sager, Stan. *Four Corners: Where the Holy Spirit Touches Navajo Hearts*. Providence House, 1982.

Council of Bishops. “United Methodists Invited to Participate in Leadership Gathering Initiative via Survey, Webinars.” Council of Bishops, The United Methodist Church, January 20, 2026. https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/leadership-gathering-initiative-via-survey-webinars-19581770.

Yá’át’ééh: The Official Site of the Navajo Nation. “History.” Accessed December 12, 2025. https://www.navajo-nsn.gov/History.